

Message In A Bottle

by La Aardvark

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Summary: Forced to leave the C.S. Radiant and set out on his own, Zimivee must travel through dangers unknown, discover friends he didn't know he could have, and survive the challenges of the Covenant's war and to find what he seeks. Cowritten with Soulguard

1. Cannon Fodder

****Segment 1: Cannon Fodder****

****November 3, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****Covenant Fighter Seraph Class****

Sunlight streaked through the front window, playing across the lone Sangheili's dark, scarred skin. Alone aboard his vessel, a seraph fighter with residence capacity for six but filled instead with supplies, the warrior sat reclined in the copilot's seat without his armor, disinclined to wear it right then when he had no need for it.

Major Hoku Zimivee was asleep, his mind reflecting on the past sequence of events that had led him here, isolated aboard a fighter flying for the frontlines. It had begun, he knew, with the betrayal, but the combat had not found him on the far away outpost until much later on, when troops could be spared for that location. It had been a wasted campaign, in the end, for the Brutesâ€| slaughtered to the last, they had succeeded only in trimming the population of Sangheili and Unggoy, and no more, before their utter defeat. There remained nothing Jiralhanae, Yanime'e or remotely Kig-yar aboard. The Command Station _Radiant_ had not seen just the one fight, though- and she had been unable to so withstand the multiple beatings her enemies gave her.

There was enough habitable area left to hold what warriors remained alive, but though these numbered still in the thousands, this was a

far cry from what had been there before. They were weakened, and wounded, and could not hold against another onslaught. The Brutes just kept coming, and coming, and comingâ€¦ finally after the fifth assault it had occurred to them all that perhaps there was a reason- and maybe a good one, considering- why the stupid Brutes had not simply and efficiently strewn the Radiant's wreckage through space. After questioning several of the Jiralhanae before execution, the reason was determinedâ€¦ but Zimivee was the only one who understood fully what it meant. They were looking for someone, someone specific, someone who absolutely positively had to be proven was dead, before the station could be destroyed.

That one lone soul, of all the ones he could think of as worthy targets, had been himself- Zimivee had become a target after transmissions had been sent back to the Covenant about the Mirrator'd agent that had in truth died some weeks back, in the initial assault. That their intel was lacking was no surprise, but how it had narrowed to Zimivee had come as little shock, either- considering it had been Zimivee at the operative's elbow the whole time, and now it was Zimivee holding those dreaded, albeit signature, swords.

Had he known what they would cause him, he would never have picked them up, but it was beyond too late now. Following enough logic to determine that since they were coming because of MÃ¼n, and apparently only because of MÃ¼n, he had opted towards the only path he could see. The enemy was afraid of the Mirrator'd, which in truth still remained something of a mystery to him, but they were cutting from their otherwise focused armada to come hunt this one lone agent.

Following this, he determined if he left, they would leave the battered station be, at least for long enough for it to rest, heal and perhaps even get out in time to miss being annihilated by the next ship to blow through, since he wasn't aboard anymore and the station's destruction need no longer be postponed. They would chase after him, insteadâ€¦ somehow he had failed to work his plan beyond that point, though, and now that he had not only left the Radiant, but had drawn fire away from her and to himself, he was somewhat at a loss as for what the next course of action ought to be.

He had known when he started out that he might not make it through the plan in one piece, but for as long as he held the Brute's attention in thrall, they would forget about the station he had left behindâ€¦ he hoped. There was certainly a pair of slipspace-capable war-birds riding his ion trail like stalking birds of prey, and whenever he let them get close they gave him all kinds of hell for the trouble.

An alarm sounded, waking the Sangheili warrior, but he neither jumped nor stiffened in his seat- he had long ago learned that unless he was captured, there was no real reason to do more than merely lift his head, and run his tired eyes over the control panel. The Brute-controlled dreadnaught Contritious Action was drawing painfully close to his small, vulnerable ship, and soon enough it would open fire on him again. With a sigh, he sat forward enough to reach the controls, and uncrossed his arms to manipulate them. Taking the seraph off of autopilot, Zimivee turned the vessel broadside to the bigger war-bird, stalling all motion. After running from them for so long, he was tired of the game and wanted to employ some other tactic at least for the time being. If things got too hairy he could

always change his mind and go back to plan A, seeing as he neither had superiors to answer to nor companions to look out for.

And he was bored- having had sufficient time to heal from his own wounds and regain the use of his left arm, Zimivee no longer noticed the rippled scar behind his shoulder, nor the pain it used to grant him whenever he exerted those muscles. After the encounter with the Forerunner hand weapon, Zimivee had lost some of his ocular receptor function, leaving him colorblind. But the slim white line across his head that crossed over one eye had no relation to that injury, and he expected the line to fade, as it had only been deep enough to part the skin at it's deepest layer, leaving his skull relatively unharmed. It would take time, though- years- perhaps before then he would find a method by which to avenge it or maybe he would die and cease to care.

Plasma seared through space over the cockpit of the seraph, cutting a clean swath through the void above him. Dodging the huge stabs meant to destroy him weren't easy when at a distance enough for them to aim properly, but the closer he got to the vessel, the better he was able to dodge, until finally he was between head-ports in the hull and within the "safe" envelope close to the ship.

He held next to the shield skin for the next several AU's, matching speed and vector as best as the seraph was able, aware they knew precisely where he was and that they couldn't do anything about it without lowering the ship's shields to let out fighters of their own- which if they did, would permit him entrance- and that was precisely what he was waiting for. He wanted in, wanted to see about killing a few of the smelly beasts.

Being alone made things interesting toward that prospect, though, and he gave the idea considerable thought even as he watched on his display that the bay doors had come active, and were about to open. Soon the shield would be lowered to let them out at him, and then-

Zimivee powered the engines, dodging swiftly away from the attack runs the other fighters were making. They danced for a time, exchanging fire, until Zimivee saw an opening he couldn't resist; with a calculated twist of trajectory, he did a spiral around the closest fighter, causing some momentary confusion as to which was which when they parted ways. Just as he had hoped, the other fighters were now helping him to shoot out one of their own, and since that pilot was too harried to call them off and too poor to evade them all, it was destroyed in short order.

Following this, the rest of them filed back to the bays, ignoring Zimivee and failing to bother to scan to determine that he wasn't one of theirs. So, naturally, he was able to follow them inside the shield envelope and was permitted into the docking bay. Once inside, though, and the doors had closed, he used the close quarters to mow down everything in sight- even breaking off the balconies that ringed the multi-level bay. Crowded beyond hope, the Brute pilots all tried to turn on him at once and collided into one another and then the walls of the bay, until their time had run out and Zimivee focused his guns on them, dissolving their vessels into the floor of the bay.

When everything was more or less quiet, Zimivee settled his bird, and

picked up his armor, donning it so he might go outside for a look around. He activated the grav lift, and then his camouflage, before descending into the smoldering bay. One look around told him he was very alone, but after picking his way across much of the rubble, he discovered he had been a bit too liberal with his application of plasma fire; he had melted the walls and the doors were all slagged shut, welded effectively into a permanent, stationary piece of the wall. He sighed, and shook his head- maybe there was one of these that he had shot through, and was stuck open, rather than closedâ€ he turned from the mess, which was rapidly cooling, going back across the rubble to investigate his theory.

There was none such on the floor of the bay, the only door he hadn't melted shut being the one he had buried shut with rubble. But climbing what remained of the balconies, he discovered at last a door that was remarkably unharmed, protected by the angle of fire to a support column. Stepping up to it, he watched as it acknowledged his presence and opened, and a calm, quiet smile touched his features.

"Hey, MÃ¼n." He whispered. "Check this out." He shook his head, bemused, and stepped forward, passing the door and going deeper into the ship he had just made a mess of. Invisible, he passed through several sector doors before encountering the first of the crew since his entrance, but the Brute had three Unggoy with that Jackal, and clamoring down the hall heading for the bay he had ruined went a Hunter-pair.

"Lekgolo." Zimivee marveled, watching them go. He hadn't seen that species since his transfer to the Command Station, where such troops were not needed. Hearing the word, the Brute assumed it was one of the Unggoy, and snarled at the trio to be silent, regaining Zimivee's attention. His face wrinkled, and he berated himself for the word- what had he been thinking? Dismissing it as it had not really compromised him, Zimivee watched as the Brute took his Unggoy away, past the Sangheili and back the way he had come in- Zimivee surmised that they might be the only ones to actually gain entrance to the bay, and that was if they followed his tracks perfectly. Deciding he need not have them enter or strip down his seraph, which would likely be his exit from here when he left it, considering, and that was where his supplies were, he followed them for long enough to catch up, then sliced them down into little pieces, first the Brute and the Jackal, then the Unggoy when they proved of a mind to attack him.

Unused to having to kill Unggoy while fighting with Brutes, Zimivee spent a moment pondering the new situation, staring down at the little bodies of the smaller creatures he had just lacerated into segments. He wondered if there would also be delusioned Sangheili still fighting for the Covenant he would encounter, but that idea seemed far fetchedâ€ until he realized the whole concept of the civil war and the breaking of the Covenant had seemed far fetched too, until it was painfully proven to him. Zimivee sighed, and shook his head, turning away. His small fighter was not equipped with starship-grade sensors, and he wanted to have a look at the readings at the Command Chamber at the very least before he left again, just to verify where he was.

That and, Zimivee noted with some satisfaction, it was nice to get out of that little bitty space for a change, and have some places to

go without being confined to two choices- inside the ship, and outside the ship. To stretch his muscles, he allowed himself to run for a spell, but not long enough to tire himself, as the ship was crawling with enemy he would need energy to dispatch. Along the way, he encountered several hundred Brutes, but without bothering to so much as warn them he was coming, he sliced many of them down from behind- but since he didn't have both of his camouflage generators on hand, once he faded back into view he was stuck that way until the device cooled.

It didn't seem to hinder him much, as even when he rounded the corner to face a mass of eight Brutes, five Jackals and twelve Grunts all packed together, he didn't encounter a lot of resistance at first. It always surprised him how every time he showed the enemy his twin swords, they tried first to flee from him rather than fight him. Amused by the chaotic jostle he had just invoked, Zimivee dove right in, cutting down more than half before one of them finally got up the gall to fight back- and all its comrades used this as an opportunity to gain some ground.

Reaching around the Jackal's shield, Zimivee wrenched it sideways, exposing the creature behind it. The result was a cry of alarm and fear, followed by a desperate volley of bolts from the plasma pistol it carried. Zimivee, annoyed by being unable to see past his sparkling shields, cut first free the hand, then its head, and let it drop. He looked around, then, forgetting the fact that he had outlasted the time it took for his camouflage engine to cool, and moved past, thinking. Were they deliberately avoiding him? Was this Mirrator so formidable that one lone member, without hope of backup, was so daunting?

He laughed aloud at the response the Brutes had mustered, laughing because he wasn't a Mirrator member at all, laughing because they were stupid enough to be fooled. Shaking his head at their mentality, he started forward, but though his reaction- the laugh- had caused them to hesitate, his motion towards them brought them all back to focus, and as one they all began to fire.

Had Zimivee owned one of the augmented Mirrator shields, he could have just stood there and took it without much to care, but his were standard grade, and he had to move to stay his life. So he did- twisting with momentum, he traced their fire from straight down the hall to along one wall, then across the ceiling following a descent down the opposite wall. Having thus avoided all of their attempts to mow him down, Zimivee now stood verily nose-to-nose with the front rank.

That detail changed, though, when the head attached to said nose was severed, followed shortly by many of the other extremities. Zimivee understood what it meant to be too close to a Brute, and he was not about to allow one of them to get a hairy hand on him. His methods had improved since MÃ¼n's death, but his style was still not perfect, or at least not within his own standards. He had seen MÃ¼n wield them, and he knew he could do it too, just like the agent, and anything less required he practice more with them. Boarding this ship was just one more training exercise, but the failure of a lesson was never any different from what it had been to begin with- fail, and die. There simply wasn't any other arena.

Zimivee didn't much care, but he fought hard and dirty, wanting to

become good enough with them so he, like MÃ¼n, could engage more than his share of the enemy and come away with less than his share of the injuries. This was combined with the facts that, though he had no wish for death, he knew the enemy wasn't going to die without him, and someone had to do it.

Cutting a swath of his own through the forces in the ship, he discovered quickly that the closer he was to his enemy when they realized he was there, the better- his main weapons were for very close enemy, and any distance would allow them to hurt him before he could hurt them- so went the lesson, learning new and often painful things that would have seemed obvious had he the time to sit back and think about them at all. Zimivee fought his way to the bridge, and with the aid of an opening salvo of grenades to clean the first row out and disorient the rest, he was able to pass the door and begin killing the command staff. When the room was clear, he closed the door and locked it shut, not wanting to be snuck up on. Disappointed he had not encountered a Prophet, Zimivee began to look over the screens and search for the data he had come here for.

Finding it, he studied the readouts for a time before deciding what to do next. He looked at the crew complement to see what he was going to be up against, then shook his head- this ship had armed for the battle ahead of them, even though it was hunting him. There were six Hunter-pairs aboard, the usual complement of Brutes and Jackals, and enough Unggoy to make him wonder who the little creatures really worked for.

But the final item on the list changed his mind almost immediately. "A Sharquoi?" He breathed aloud. What in creation did they think they were fighting, here? He looked at the door, speculatively, wondering if he would be able to make it back to his seraph before the remaining crew got that creature loose. He tapped the controls, looking for the status of the thing- dormant. Zimivee nearly fainted with his breath of relief.

He was most definitely not going to stay aboard a ship with one of those things, regardless who it pledged loyalty with. But the coordinates they were at and the ones they were heading towards made him wonder if he might see about dispatching that monster from afar, so he might not need to worry about it. Tapping a claw on the side of the control panel, Zimivee tried to think of a plan. He couldn't fly the starship alone, but he didn't know what MÃ¼n had done to destroy the last one, and he was not about to let the Brutes have her back. So he needed a plan.

"The Unggoy." He mused. Jackals were out of the question for a very good reason, but if there were three kinds of Unggoy, maybe he could get a few of them to open their eyes. He did, after all, have history with some of those creatures where they fought the Brutes together, and with the help of one very charismatic Sangheili, made true warriors out of them, completely crippling the Brutes without crippling the Unggoy simultaneously. But getting them to listen might become tiresome. Especially with Brutes at their heels.

Zimivee shook his head. If it worked- if it worked- he would still need to get past the armada already there, surrounding that blue-green ball that was turning black with smoke in the atmosphere. It was the Human's homeworld, but he hadn't bothered to read off the name of the planet, as he found the detail rather

unimportant.

Shaking his head, he straightened, and looked around the room. "Well, Sharquoi or not, I am significantly lacking in options, suddenly." He said, to himself.

An active comn unit on the belt of a nearby dead Brute decided to respond anyway; "Yes, you are. Come out where we can kill you, filthy Sangheili!"

Zimivee started at the corpse, at first not realizing the beast was dead and thinking it was speaking. After seeing it was just the active comn, he relaxed. Stooping, he picked it up, and looked down at it. "You are next." He had long ago stopped telling them not to use his species' name, as it was a rather useless statement, and they used it anyway, and even the ones that didn't died all the same. "But I don't take orders from despicable, dishonorable Jiralhanae." He switched it off, and tossed it down, before making his way to the door he had locked.

He figured as long as that Sharquoi stayed in it's confines, he would try his plan- but the moment it proved itself loose, he knew without question that he would be leaving the Contritious Action with all due haste.

Zimivee made his way out of the Command Chamber and down into the maze of halls, in search of Brutes that needed killing. In order for his plan to work in the slightest, he would need to be rid of all the Brutes first- one thing Grunts detested worse than anything else was being forced to fight their own, and it would come down to that inevitably if he got that far with enemy still dogging his heels.

The first group appeared nearly solid Unggoy, which he thought at first was a good thing, accepting the turn to progress as acceptable until he realized they were all trying to kill him. Irritated, he had to cut down more than he would have liked, before he could get through them enough to reach their commanding Brute, and kill that. Seeing no more Brutes and no Kig-yar anywhere in sight, he fled the remaining Grunts, leaving them all wondering what in the world had just happened- it was something shy of uncharacteristic of the Sangheili people to leave an attacking enemy so cold in their dust, the way Zimivee just had. Turning one's back on one's enemy was considered 'dishonorable', and was therefore frowned upon. They couldn't know what he had planned for them.

Following his nose, Zimivee was able to track down the next company of Brutes without that much trouble, but this time he remembered to activate his invisibility before engaging. It helped, he realized, as he flew at the first still unsuspecting Brute and carved it down to more manageable pieces before it realized. He turned from the first into the second, looking to mow them back and down before too much time had passed to allow them time to realize where he was and what he was doing, as he had no intention of letting them brace against his attack.

Energy swords or not, there was still only a mortal behind them, and a small one for his species, at that. He cut through the fourth Brute and trod over it as it fell, but even as that one died and dropped to the floor, the one directly behind it seemed to have been waiting for

that very moment, and snatched out with a hand bigger than Zimivee's face. Before he could recoil, it had clamped that hand around his neck, and brought his momentum to a screeching halt. Zimivee stopped and stared at the Brute, a little surprised. Neither moved for a heartbeat, the one startled to know he had actually caught that whirling dervish, the other surprised to know he had been grabbed rather than hit. A moment later it was over and the Brute rammed his other hand forcefully forward, spike rifle in hand. Zimivee twisted, coiling on the end of the Brute's arm, sliced it free and discarded it on his way over the owner's head. He cut that free too for good measure.

Completing the landing back to his hooves, he was forced into a backflip across the top of the freshly fallen Brute that had had a hold of him, as a solid rain of plasma sailed by over his head at chest level. He didn't know if he had enough shield left to handle that kind of barrage and was disinterested to find out the hard way. Righted from that maneuver, he sprang forward, walked across the shoulders of the Brute in front and dropped back to floor level right in the middle of them all. From there he had only to lash out in whichever direction he chose.

It actually proved more of a tangle than he anticipated, as the Brutes not under immediate assault tried to kill him each in their own way- some shot, some punched out, and one tried to land on him, bodily, bearing him to the floor. Zimivee managed to evade them all, but it took more than just standing there cutting them apart with MÃ¼n's swords.

For the first half of the fight he had only to duck and dodge the flying rounds and arms. For the second half he had to move like lightning, which meant he only got away with about half of what he would have liked. Still, he completed the fight without injury spare one bruise, and by it discovered what it meant to perform a dance of daggers.

It was the same dance MÃ¼n had done, all those times before. Turning to see farther down the hall, Zimivee spied more Grunts coming, but these were accompanied by Jackals and another couple of Brutes. He didn't need a million of them, he surmised, but it would be prudent not to kill them indiscriminately when it came back to getting them on his side. So instead of making his introduction with a few well-aimed grenades, like he would have any other day, Zimivee charged in with nothing more than his shields and his swords. When the fire got heavy, he rounded across the ceiling again to avoid much of it, having found the move quite effective and unwilling to discard something that worked just because someone might have anticipated it and compensatedâ€¦ an up-flung grenade neatly missed his shoulder, the same one that had nearly been lost to him by the last grenade to stick there, and the mental implications sent imaginary fire coursing down that arm.

Landing back on the floor, Zimivee was clenching not only his mandibles but both fists as he bit back that phantom, insisting to himself it wasn't real and it wasn't there. The exercise proved unhelpful, but the imaginary pain did fade faster than any real ache might have, even as needles overloaded his shields and dug into his armor. In addition to the two Brutes and the Jackals, he had to kill three of the Grunts just to get free of them, but in the middle of the fight he was rather disinclined to spare them at all, due to his

personal circumstances.

Zimivee rounded a corner, out of sight of the Unggoy, leaned on the wall and sagged to the floor, gasping. Winded and trying with all his might to will the pain away, the pain he knew wasn't real, Zimivee felt he had had all he could take. He looked down at his camouflage engine to check the time he had left, and right as his eyes lit on the timer gauge, it shut off, revealing his presence to all that dared look. He deactivated the swords, and hung them on his belt, well knowing he couldn't use at least one of them for as long as that phantom continued to torment him. Much of the muscle across his shoulder blade and a piece of that deltoid was missing, but at times his body would insist they were still there, and that they hurt like all hell.

It was something he would need more time to get used to- the injury was old enough that it didn't bother him on a matter of course, but when something invoked the memory of the infliction, it all came back as if it had happened just an hour before. Gathering his legs beneath him, he pushed off the floor, determined not to be wasted for the effects of a false pain. Checking his camouflage engine told him he had to be discreet for another hour, but checking the battery on MÃ¼n's swords told him he needed to pick his targets carefully. They weren't dry yet- but the Contritious Action was a big ship, and she had a lot of crew. Zimivee made his way through the corridors down the center of the prow of the craft, heading aft. For the moment, he didn't care where he wound up, so long as he didn't get cut off irreparably from the bridge. The odds of such a thing happening were higher if he spent MÃ¼n's swords on the wrong targets, but he had already removed one category of enemy from worth on them.

Ahead, he heard a Brute snarling orders at his fellows, and drew up short. He wasn't sure how many there were, but unless his arm stopped bothering him, he couldn't handle much over two. Right when he was about to come to a decision, his senses freaked at the sudden introduction of motion behind him, and he never really got to know what that decision might have been as he spun on a hoof to face whatever it was that had snuck so successfully up behind him. His face twisted into an unappreciative snarl at the irony of his luck- two Brutes, one with a plasma rifle, the other with one of those ugly, clumsy and heavy RPGs, and both were looking right at him, from just twelve paces away.

The lead Brute, the one on the left, roared and began backing up, firing his rifle. Following suit, the second began to empty the cartridge of shot grenades at the lone Elite, backing up in step with his comrade. Zimivee easily avoided one, but not both, but the circumstances were making him angry. Catching several rounds of searing hot plasma on his shield broadside, he charged forward full-tilt. Without much thought to the matter, he hit one wall, ricocheted to the other, then rebounded back into the lead Brute, landing the first contact with a well-aimed hoof, smacking the Brute in the ear. Twisting in the air, Zimivee landed upright facing away, but he pivoted easily to swing around and plant the same hoof in the same Brute's belly, adding winded to his dazed state of being.

The second Brute played into his hands when it finished reloading, emptying the second clip onto the first Brute in some apparent attempt to shoot through it, at Zimivee, who simply stepped behind the bigger creature. When the last grenade was airborne, the

Sangheili darted from the staggered and badly wounded first Brute to meet the second. Catching the blade of the grenade launcher with his good hand, he turned it aside, then hit the wielder in the chin so his head rocked back- and followed up with a harder, faster blow straight to the trachea. Zimivee didn't even bother to watch it fall, suffocating slowly, before turning back to the semi-recovered Brute he had attacked first.

Once the second was taken care of and out of mind, he was able to focus, and the already wounded Brute he had left behind proved little hazard when he got back to it. Zimivee turned another kick to it's head, knocking it off its balance, and with a single second's worth of activation time, one sword flashed to life in a blaze of motion before vanishing again and reattaching back on his belt. He held still, then, one arm curled, the other hung by a thumb on his belt, watching as the Brute sagged, and finally toppled, the head rolling free on impact with the floor. Zimivee looked down the hall, then, dismissing them both in favor of more that might have spied him while he was otherwise occupied. Seeing no one had come, he allowed himself to relax for a moment, and assess the situation. From somewhere down the same hall he had once heard Brutes arguing, another sound came, and it froze him in his tracks. Oh- so _that_ was why there were so many Brutes over there. On second thoughtâ€¦!

Zimivee turned and left the area, well knowing he could never have taken a Sharquoi even had he all the advantages and it was a good day. Let the Brutes handle it- there soon would be no more of any of them.

2. Just One More Try

****Segment 2: Just One More Try****

****November 3, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****Covenant Capital Ship **_**Contritious Action**_**

For a brief moment it appeared as though there might be reconciliation between the mutinous duo, but then more of them joined the argument and things got really badly out of hand. For as long as each took to inhale for the next volley of unkind words, the rest filled the void with their own shouting and insults. Zimivee had to admit- some of it was hilarious. But being in the middle of the mess, it was hard to find time to laugh. He wasn't sure how they had put together enough coherent thought to catch him this way, but he was sure it had been a mistake on his part- he just hadn't figured out which part he'd messed up yet.

The good thing was that he had managed to goad one of the subordinate Brutes into thinking he was just as worthy of rank and title as the next guy, and like a fool for the timing, he went for it. Now there was a riot happening around him, and he really only needed one arm to carve himself an exit- the problem was that while much of the fight was around him, some of it was still aimed at him, too, and each time he thought to exit the scene and find a quieter stretch of hall to inhabit, one of the ones next to him would realize the prize they were fighting over was about to get away and would get in the way.

For Zimivee, it was more than an annoyance, and he didn't want to have to stay put and kill them all one at a time before he could extract himself from the scene. It was havoc, flailing and thrashing Brutes crowding out the hall and at times crushing him between them. He was more or less convinced that were it not for MÃ¼n's swords, he would long ago have been squashed. Cutting through the pectoral muscles across the chest of the Brute before him, he dug the blade deep into the so opened ribcage and parted the soft tissues within, unable to merely cut the beast in half for the lack of elbowroom.

Following the fall of that Brute, the situation around him seemed to somehow resolve itself all on its' own, and right as he realized he was in more trouble than before, it all came down on top of him. One Brute seized his swordarm by the wrist, the next grabbed his other at the elbow, and between the two of them with added help they got the sword free of his grasp. As the commotion stilled, so too did the noise created by it, and Zimivee was held witness as the original leader of the Captainless band pushed forward to face him.

Zimivee peered up at him, wondering what hell he was about to dive into, but he never got to ask, the Brute burying a fist in his middle. "Now I will kill you, filthy Sangheili cur! You have caused enough trouble to befit a hundred like you! First I want to know who sent you, and where they are." The Brute demanded.

Gagging, Zimivee had barely enough sense left to know he had to come up with a reply fast unless getting hit again- possibly harder- was in his plan. Inhaling proved difficult at best, but even as he regained his wits he realized his captors weren't holding him correctly if they meant to keep him. "I wasâ€¦" He wheezed, "just passing throughâ€¦"

Dissatisfied, the Brute hit him again, but this time across the side of his head. Zimivee heard something crack, but through the blur of pain he wasn't sure if it was a knuckle or his head. "Lies! Filthy Sangheili lies! You think you can fool me??" The Brute roared, before punching himself in the chest. "I know better!"

Zimivee just chuckled, his head hurting too acutely to say much else.

"You dare laugh at me!" The Brute tore him from the grasp of the other two, and shook him in mid-air. "You dare laugh at the mighty Barok!"

Shaking his head to clear it, Zimivee focused on the Brute's face. "Maybe I wasn't laughing at you." He answered, quietly. It gave the illusion that all his previous actions had been false, and that in truth he was what he was the farthest from, at the moment- cool, calm and collected. Zimivee was half afraid he might pass out before the next sentence was spoken, but he knew the Brutes wouldn't keep him alive just so he would be awake when they killed him. They weren't that happy with him, at present.

Barok about burst, blubbering speechlessly at the Elite in his hands. He was too angry to not speak, but too far removed from any real reply to have anything to say. The expression on the Brute's face was enough to cause Zimivee's smile to be genuine enough, however, laughing inside at the unfortunate leader. If he hadn't been

ridiculed before, he was certainly being made out as a fool now. Finally, Barok could take no more, and decided quickly what to do next. "You will die! I will rip you apart! You will know fear! And I shall savor the sound of your piteous screams for mercy!"

"Savor it you mightâ€|" Zimivee drawled, "if you live long enough to hear it." He waited for the pain to wake him up, waited long enough to know his brain had cleared away the fuzz of impact trauma with a rush of adrenalin, and once he was able to think coherently again, he moved.

Previously hung on the brink of multiple dislocation, Zimivee twisted in a direction most Sangheili could not, twisted so his body was almost curled double, backwards and to the left. The Brutes watching assumed he was pulling out of socket in an odd fashion, but Barok understood the motion was none of his doing even as he tried to correct. Completing the turn, Zimivee slipped completely free of the Brute's grasp, and dropped back a pace away right onto his hooves where he had been before. Looking up at the Brute, Zimivee suddenly grinned, and with his other sword in hand, opened Barok's throat onto his chest, drenching the behemoth in his own blood. Turning from that, he laid into the openmouthed and awestruck crowd behind him, carving through it in search of his lost blade.

Even after the last one had been dead for a short while, it took him more time of pure searching just to find it, but once he had it he stepped past the corpses littering the floor and walked down the hall. Zimivee felt like he was walking on clouds for the first minute and a half, then the feeling dropped to akin to carrying lead weights strapped to his hooves. He knew instinctually when the view before him grew dim that he was in trouble, and this time there was no Mirrator'd agent to watch over him.

"MÃ¼nâ€|" Zimivee muttered. "Where are you when I need you?" His steps began to drag, until he hit the wall and slid across that for a distance, grinding slowly to a stop. After he had stood there for several seconds, leaning on the wall, he sagged to his knees, and from there sat on his heels. There was no way to get to the seraph, no way to escape the ship, nothing between him and the crew, what remained of it, and no allies within reach.

"_Get up."_

Dazed, Zimivee raised his head, wondering what a distinctively Sangheili voice was doing on a purely Brute controlled vessel. It hadn't been his own, that much he knew. But the hallway was empty.

"_Get up!"_

The insistence, the urgency, followed by what felt like a hard push, sent Zimivee staggering to his hooves again, if less than coherent about it. He looked back the way he had come, irritated and wanting to know who was there, but what he saw didn't match what he had just heard. His eyes opened fully when a spike grenade sailed past his left shoulder, flipping end for end. Fire shot through that arm, wakening his battered brain and stimulating a faster reaction than he would have previously been capable of mustering. Zimivee turned and fled, well knowing he was in no condition to be fighting another batch of angry Brutes, no matter how many or few there were.

The grenade detonated behind him, sending shrapnel and flak flying after him, but he knew where he was headed- the seraph he had arrived in was in a bay too far from where he was to reach without some kind of shortcut he didn't know about. But the bridge was just a few halls away, with a lockable door.

Making it that far, he made sure the door closed, then locked it when it did, and set one of the monitors to watching the entrance hall that led to it and set the computer to sound an alarm if anything came close. Finished with that, he sagged onto the floor in front of the console, hardly winded from the sprint but wanting nothing more than to make his head stop pounding like it was. He bowed it, and put up both hands, holding his aching cranium and trying to ignore the fire in the veins of his left arm.

In the settling still and quiet calm, Zimivee could hear every little detail- even the sound of his own hearts beating, pounding to the pulse in his head. Once the worst of the pain had subsided, he took his hands down, allowing himself to hang his left where it would hurt the least, curled against his chest. He went to look around, but a rather prominent object in the foreground caught his attention and held it. Looking past the nose of the needler, he focused on the masked face of the Unggoy holding it, leveled and pointed right at him, center-of-mass. Focusing past that and a little higher still, his gaze came to rest on a Brute. He sighed, and let his gaze sink. So that was what his mistake had been- he'd left this room open when he'd gone from it, and the enemy had infiltrated it and used the inship controls to not only locate him, but to direct the forces within the area in a manner sufficient to trap him.

Barely had he completed the thought than the Brute pushed the Grunt aside with his foot, and stepped forward. He laughed. "You are pitiful, little Sangheili. You sit there defeated, like your people."

Zimivee shook his head, looking up. "I am not yet dead." He answered, softly. "Therefore I am not defeated."

"You are wounded, proud warrior, and you are going to die. How blind you are to the truth!" The Brute laughed, gloating. "You cannot last- you will die. And it shall be by Jiralhanae hands!"

"Even so." Zimivee plucked M4's swords from his belt. "They won't be yours." Using his elbows to aid the maneuver, Zimivee launched from the base of the console into a lunge, and scissored the Brute right in half at the waist before slamming an elbow into his chest so the two halves fell separately. Standing now, he could see what the bridge really contained- more Brutes, all staring at him in rabid contempt and none without one or two Unggoy at their side. Surprisingly, there were no Kig-yar present. Zimivee sagged, disappointed. "Oh, bugger."

Plasma lanced the air from those that held plasma weaponry, grenades sailing in from those that did not, grenades from launchers and hand-thrown style in like kind. Zimivee ducked, feeling his headache for every step he took and knowing how little room for negotiation he had when the grenades began to detonate. A string of detonations followed his path, but when he ducked behind a place that he realized afforded no sightlines, he switched on his camouflage and darted out

again, this time free of an explosive following. Four Brutes sent their Grunts forward, to flush him out, and while they were performing said duty, Zimivee got behind their commanders and cut them all down. He hurt too much to play this game, and the faster it was over with the happier he would be.

One by one the enemy fell, cut at the base of the skull neatly and efficiently, only the last few realizing something was amiss, but too late to do much about it. The last one saw him coming, his transparent form cresting a console and sailing through the holographic controls hovering above it, and put up his arms to stall the launched attack, but Zimivee just cut them out of the way, clearing his path before making the final cut through the horrified Brute's neck. Only the bones in the back held his head up, but without muscles to control the motions of the bones, the weight of his head fell backwards, snapping them apart and ending the slower death with a quick one. Dropping to the floor, the blood-drenched Brute slid through a slick pool of it, before settling.

Zimivee turned to the gathered rank of Unggoy, and stared them down. He spread his arms. "I am defeated."

One of them gave a nervous, half-hearted laugh, but they were all too wary of following the paths of their commanders, of being run through that meat-grinder, to actually take the jest for what it was. In an attempt to muster courage within the numbers, a Grunt in the front pointed his needler at the Elite. "Why you no kill us too? Why you no fight us?"

"Why should I?" Zimivee asked, wondering how long this would take. Still- as much as he wasn't feeling up to it, he had gotten somehow off to a good start. "You are no danger to me."

"We kill you easy! Weâ€¦!" After a moment, it appeared to occur to the Grunt what exactly he was saying, and he shut up.

"Why should you? What danger am I to you?" Zimivee countered. "I fought beside your kind aboard the Radiant, and they fought bravely, with honorâ€¦!"

Surprise wrote itself across the little creature's partially obscured face. "We brave?"

Wearily, Zimivee nodded. So far so good- especially if he did pass out. "They were killing the Brutes then- they came to kill us all, savagely and without honor. They would have killed everyone to the last one, had they won."

"You fight them before? You win?"

"No, we fought them, and we won. Myself, my fellow Sangheili, and the ranks of brave Unggoy." If that crazy warrior that wore the ink could do it, so could he. Maybe he wasn't as good, but he seemed to be getting through to the little creature nonetheless. Zimivee watched the speculative expression turn to awe at the mention of the last on his list, and how he dubbed them. Brave. It wasn't every day one of the greater races of the once-whole Covenant decried the Unggoy as brave.

"You be honest?" The Grunt asked, suspicious, jabbing his needler in

the Elite's direction. "Me no trust you, come and kill Brutes and then expecting me kin to trust you word."

Zimivee sagged back to the floor, unable to bear his own weight anylonger. If Barok had been able to hit him any harder, he couldn't imagine it. His guts hurt, but not like his head. He wondered as he settled if he didn't have a fracture, or a concussion, which might explain why it was so hard to stay coherent. "Why would I lie to youâ€|?" He heard himself saying, even as the environment tilted oddly and the image began to swim. "If I had been a Brute, I would never have spared youâ€| not on the _Radiant_. Not here."

The Grunt started forward a step, but the one next to his elbow stopped the advance with a hand on the other's elbow spike. After sharing a look, the first one spoke, "Leader kill us if we no kill him."

"Why we kill him?" The second questioned. "He no threat to us. He going to die, sitting there. We no need to do nothing. You no see that?"

"He no even hurt! What kill him?"

The second Grunt hopped forward and waved a hand in front of Zimivee's face. He got no reaction whatsoever, but the warrior hadn't passed out as yet, fighting something inside to stay awake. "You see? You see? He no even aware where he is. You could kick him and he no going to notice." Peering speculatively into the Elite's eyes, the Grunt shook his little head. "Ah, that no good."

"What no good? What you doing up there?" The first Grunt hopped forward, causing the rest of them to waddle forward and cluster around the fallen Elite. The second one pointed at Zimivee's face.

"He no got no focus, now. Something hit him in head, me thinks too hard for healthy. He die if he go to sleep. You no need to do nothing, you want him dead."

The first Grunt pondered that. "He no want us to die. He no even bother challenging us. What we do now?"

The second Grunt shrugged. "Me not know."

The whole group began to mutter amongst themselves, exchanging ideas and dismissing most of them. The commotion only stalled at the insistent behest of the alarm Zimivee had set, focusing all their attentions on that console. Approaching it, the first Grunt read off the information scrolling across the holographic readouts. He turned to the door in time for it to be hit repeatedly, stiffly. More Brutes had come, and they wanted in.

The Grunt turned to his pack-mates. "We decide what we doing, and we decide that now. We no have no more time. He die we do nothing, he die we open that door. He only chance is if we helps him. I asks you what we doing."

The pounding on the door became more insistent, more angry. The Brutes were becoming irritated from being made to wait.

Almost as one the Unggoy turned to look at the door, then back again at Zimivee, before the group split up. Something about what the Elite had said had struck a chord, but the only way to find out more without being beaten or dismissed out of hand by the Brutes was to preserve the Elite. Half the Grunts went to the doorway, the other half pulled Zimivee out of plain sight, so when the door opened, all that was to be seen were the bodies of the Brutes. The lead Brute to enter the room first looked at the mess, and sniffed reproachfully, completely ignoring the fact that there was a rising commotion involving copious amounts of chattering converse in the Unggoy's native language going on behind him. Turning, he glared down at them, but when this warning was ignored, he kicked one hard enough to pop a crack in the methane tank on his back when the unfortunate creature struck the wall. The Brutes cleared the area around the battered Grunt, as he tried to pick himself up, but before he was quite back on his feet the split in his tank turned into a full-fledged rupture, and broiling flames swallowed the area completely as the methane touched the oxygen.

The remaining Unggoy watched in horror, but the Brutes were laughing. "Be quiet with that annoying gibberish, scum! What happened here, why are all the Jiralhanae dead? Why are you still alive?" The Brute that had kicked the Grunt into the wall demanded.

Grunts faces turned upwards, and their gazes settled on the Brute's. Even those that had been outside waiting to be let in seemed to understand the sentiment shared by the survivors of Zimivee's second assault on the bridge.

"Answer me!" The Brute roared, balling his fists in preparation to hit something.

A Grunt several paces away raised a little fist of his own. "We no answer to you, big ugly! We tired of being kicked and killed like we no worth nothing!"

The Brute laughed, heartily. "You _aren't_ worth anything, little Grunt. Your people are nothing to anyone, and you serve in this Covenant only at the whimsy of the Prophets! It is amusing to watch you die in mockery of battle. Now you will die for questioning me, and I shall savor every traitorous scream you emit!" He raised his fists and charged forward, all the rest of the Jiralhanae following suit, but they each and all made the same fundamental mistake of pushing the others aside to get at that one, sole Grunt.

It was all happening so fast that the speaker Grunt regretted his words and tried to flee at first, but he stopped and dropped to the ground on instinct when he heard those familiar words: _"Down in front!"_

Following them shortly came the telltale explosion of not one but several grenades, and following that were the screams of the Brutes that had been at the center of an expanded and distanced ring of Unggoy. Between them all they had enough grenades to not need their weaponry, but some of them did shoot needles into the fray anyway, dissuading the accosted Brutes from breaching the circle. When the last one had fallen and lay still, the Grunt in the middle of it all stood up and looked at the mess.

"Me no do that again." He said, wiping Brute blood from his

arms.

Grunts cheered and howled, jumping up and down. It was only when another of their number heard the commotion and came from inside the Command Chamber to investigate that they calmed- and sobered when they saw his expression.

"What you all doing? Foolish! You keep you heads, now, or you all regret everything you ever did. Brutes no fall for same trick twice, they no need learn of this mess be our fault. You all be quiet."

Heads dipped. "We finished."

"Good. Me need something to keep Elite awake. He going down quick and he no make no sense anymore when he speak. You and you, go and get medical stuff, say anyone that stops you you been sent by big Brute, met with our ghostly assailant friend there and live."

The Unggoy scattered, some heading into the chamber, others off on the errand. For as long as the Brutes didn't know what had just happened, things might go smoothly enough for most of the Grunts aboard to get out of the way when things got nasty. Inevitably, it was only a matter of time before someone learned the truth.

On the bridge, the first Grunt to speak to the Elite waddled back to the pilot controls at the far end from the door and sat down, dipping his fingers in the holographic display. "This no be good." He muttered. "Amam, who here know how unlock course plotting?"

Amam, coming back from sending off for the medical supplies, hopped up beside his pack-mate to see the controls. "It be locked? Why?"

The other Grunt shrugged. "Me not know. Maybe Brute lock it in before he die, so he no need to mind it while he fight?"

"Makes sense, but me not know anyone who know that. Maybe if we get the Elite woke up he might know."

"He still alive?"

Amam shrugged. "Maybe. Me not been over there to see in time enough for things to change, he maybe better, you never know." Looking back across the chamber from where he had come, Amam spied the Grunts clustered around Zimivee, discussing what to do about him. "We not be in such good ways ourselves, Hacat."

Hacat only nodded. "We arrive at Human home world by tomorrow. What we do until then, if we be keeping that one alive?"

"We first see if he be living for that long, Hacat." Amam advised. "_Then_ we wonders about such things." With those words he left the other Grunt to join those around Zimivee and see if in fact the Elite would last long enough to front their little rebellion. Sometimes the darndest things would come along— all Amam knew to do was make the best of it, and hope everything turned out well enough- but all things considered, the worst that could happen would be they all died.

Brutes had difficulty thinking beyond that far.

3. Making A Difference

****3: Making a Difference ****

****November 4, 2552 Sol Relative Time ****

****Covenant Capital Ship **_**Contritious Action **_**

Early morning proved no less busy or hassle-free than the day before. The only difference was now that the self-proclaimed Grunt command crew had more or less convinced the rest of the ship that everything was fine and well and that the Elite invader was dead, they had to come up with constant excuses and reasons why no one else was allowed inside that chamber.

The truth was strikingly more than their story, however, as even though Zimivee was very much still alive, and they had somehow enabled him to retain consciousness throughout the night, he was far from a threat to anyone, and was as about as useful. Now genuinely tired, even after having stayed awake for longer on less several times before, Zimivee wanted nothing less than to be left alone so he might get some rest- he hadn't stirred from where he had slumped the previous evening, but his mind had gone through more gigabytes of data than he could currently recall. Amam knew they were running out of time, and with the course locked and no conceivable way to correct that, there appeared no more time to buy. Picking up a packet of stims, Amam hopped past the sentry Unggoy standing in front of the Elite and dosed him with it.

Zimivee came alert all at once, at first for the small, sharp pain of administration, then when the medication took effect. He stared hard at the Grunt that had given it to him for a moment, unsure where he was or what he was looking at, at first. When the picture cleared, though, everything came back and he remembered how much trouble he was in. "Hi."

Amam crossed his little arms. "We going to hit Human world. If not that, we going to hit Brute ship in atmosphere of Human world. There too many to miss them all. What you big plan now, dancer?"

Zimivee took a deep breath. "Whâ€¦ we're going to hit it?"

"We hit something. That not avoidable. We gots maybe three, four hours at best speed. We no can slow down, we not know Brute's command codes." Amam said. "What you big plan?"

"Wellâ€¦ I wasn't going to let them have the ship back, since I managed to take most of her from them, but aside from thatâ€¦" He rubbed his face with his hands. "Try to stay alive, by whatever method."

Amam snorted, unimpressed. "You come here and make big mess and kill crew, and you no got a plan? I disappointed in you, warrior. Who you work for? He need replacing, he as incompetent as the rest of them are."

"Freelance." Zimivee answered, softly. "I work alone."

Amam nodded, as if understanding. "Oh, I see. Me no need your kind here. What we needs is plan to fix problem we got now, not something off wall that may not work."

"If you're going to crash, and you know no way to correct or stop your vectors, why are you all still aboard?" Zimivee asked. "Aren't there insertion pods, escape pods, fighters and dropships in the bays? What purpose is to be served by staying here?"

Amam shook his head. "We leaves now, Brutes get in and fix ship. Then they shoots us all out of sky."

"Ohâ€¦ you have more time than you let on, then."

"We still far out enough for correction to be possible, yes. But we no going to let that happen if it mean bad things for us. We kill our Leaders for you, warrior. You best not make that bad for us."

"Why are you looking at me, when you've already dismissed what I had to say?" Zimivee asked, running his eyes around the room. He counted eleven Grunts, but that was only those in plain view from where he was sitting now. If there were more, it was in a curious place, though, as everywhere the Grunts were they were in clusters. The cluster around him looked more like a guard detail for a prisoner, though, as while all of them were armed, those in particular had their weaponry in hand and at the ready- if not pointed at him as yet.

Amam gave him a disappointed look. "Who you be, stranger? You no act like other Elites. Why you come here? Where you brothers?"

Zimivee shook his head. "My brother is dead. My people are dying. I came here because I was trying to protect a precious few of them that couldn't hold against another attack. I don't even know if it worked." He cast the Grunt to the left a look when it fidgeted. "I came here because I am hunted for being a part of somethingâ€¦ something I had not even known of prior to the beginning of thisâ€¦ war."

"What that be?" Amam asked.

Zimivee looked at the Grunt, focusing on the diminutive creature and looking him in the eye. He rather expected the reaction- everyone looked at him like that, nowadays, ever since MÃ¼n had died. Everyone that looked him in the eye, usually donned an expression saying they regretted getting that near. Amam backed up. "I am not at liberty to disclose that. Not to you."

"But you be hunted for thisâ€¦ others know. Others come and hunt you but only they that know. Why it big secret?" Amam asked, awed by the sheer stone cold frigidity of that gaze. He had never seen a soul so frozen. He figured it made sense, in a way- no one with a sense of self-worth would have come aboard alone. It had been suicidal, something the Sangheili were not renowned for. Due to their honor code, it was excruciatingly hard to locate one willing to throw himself at the enemy like cannon fodder- that was what the Unggoy were for.

Zimivee tested his limbs, then pushed upright. Once he was steady on

his hooves, he looked down at the Unggoy addressing him. "I'm not one of them. The Brute armada thinks I am. The only way to get away from that mistake is to find the ones that really are. They alone are what keeps me one step ahead of those that are sent to hunt me, and kill me if they can."

"And?" Amam prompted.

"And, little Unggoy, as such I cannot judge you as either worthy or not of hearing what I know of them. I promised not to tell." Zimivee stepped outside of the ring of Grunts, feeling the eyes on him as he did so. Spying the loner by the door, he paced the distance between them until he stood close enough to touch. "My swords." He extended a hand. "Please."

The wide eyed Unggoy cast a look past him at Amam, trembling. He wasn't at all sure how the Elite had known he of all of them had the weapons. But at a nod from the other Grunt, he produced the twin blades, and returned them to their caretaker. Zimivee fastened them back to his belt, much to Amam's relief, rather than lighting them off. He turned to look at the bridge before speaking to Amam again.

"Can you hold here until your time is spent sufficiently for course correction to be impossible?"

"We hold here long as we need. Why? You no go nowhere." Amam said.

"Yes, I am." Zimivee countered, meeting the Grunt's gaze. "I told you, I work alone- that means I answer to no one. And while my opinion of your people is greater than it had been during the reign of the Covenant, I am not enthralled enough to call you Leader." He turned away again, to face the door. "Open it."

"You come back, right?" Amam asked, tentatively.

Zimivee paused. "No. Not here." He half-turned to look past his shoulder at the Grunt. "When the time is up, you shouldn't be here either."

"Where we go we not be killed?" Amam asked.

"The surface. Reports have it that it is a no-mans'-land down there. Anyone of any creed could hide there. Just pray they do not find what they are looking for, and glass the place."

Amam nodded. "We find others, we group with them. You think you find what you looking for here?"

"I know they're here- but there may only be one or two of them. I don't expect to catch them right away." Zimivee allowed. "Now open the door- I need to collect power nodes from my seraph fighter in the bay I destroyed at the least, for when my swords go dry. I expect there will be more than enough enemy to go around, even on the ground."

Amam motioned at the Grunt by the door, and he unlocked it so the Elite might pass. When he was gone, he closed and locked it again. Turning to see Amam, he asked quietly, "He no all there, is

he?"

Amam shook his head, sadly. "No one is, anymore, young one. It is the way of war."

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Zimivee paced a short distance down the hall, then paused and looked back in time to see the door finish closing. They seemed good enough towards logic and reason, but they were too easily swayed. He didn't need them coming back around to the Brutes when he thought they had his back. The only conclusion he had come to then was to leave them all behind, and hope they maintained their position like they had said they would, for long enough. He hated to waste a good ship like this one, but in the end he knew he was going to leave it again anyway.

Maybe letting the Grunts have the Command Chamber had been for the best- sentient eyes watching the controls that had previously fallen between sides of the war again and again so fast it was dizzying. Maybe now the Brutes couldn't catch him like they had before. He put the thoughts behind him, and focused forward. He still felt slightly off his balance, but he knew his only real injury was to his head, and for now all that was was a dull throbbing headache behind his eyes.

Around the first corner he activated his camouflage, and around the second found the first cluster of Brutes, all waiting for word from those that had died long ago, the Brutes on the bridge. Taking his swords from his belt, he contemplated cutting them all to pieces, then decided it would be a waste of power, and flew at them in a calculated launch so his first three connections were immediately fatal. Drawing from these, he slammed his fist into the next Brute's nose, then when it's head was rocked back, opened its throat with a sideways cut. Invisible, the rest of the group could only guess at what was happening, but they decided as much was dangerous and they backed away while saturating the area with shot grenades. Zimivee flared into view when one struck his shields directly, then vanished again after. Roars of denial and rage followed his charge at them, flipping one sword in his grasp and punching it through the chest of a Brute, before drawing it upwards and through the beast's heart.

Turning into a spin, he sliced deep gouges into the remaining three, slicing free a few arms and their concentration. Severed thus, Zimivee was able to dispatch them all quickly and efficiently. Deactivating his weapons, he hung them on his belt again and resumed his trot to the bay where he had left his seraph.

The way there proved mostly clear, only two more Brutes and a Jackal standing in a sector door right before the bay entrance came up. Zimivee worried at the ease of his progression, wondered what they had waiting for him, especially since his camouflage engine was growing warm. Planetfall was mere hours away, but something told him he needed to be on his toes if he expected to make it that far. Pausing just inside the bay, Zimivee surveyed the scene. Cooled from the assault upon his entrance, the slagged metals of the bay's construction made for an interesting, and often semi-reflective, almost organic look. But the organisms occupying the space made it seem a dangerous beauty indeed. Zimivee watched in silence as Brutes

thumped their fists on the hull of his seraph, unable to access the interior and long past frustrated by the fact. He didn't smile- he was too wound up, too tired, and too concerned about the next couple of hours of his life to accept a sentiment as menial as mirth.

He had felt trapped before, had felt backed into a corner that was inescapable- but this time it was only him, without friends, without brothers, without backup, and no Mirrator agent to come to his rescue. He had found there was nothing he hated more than to be forced through battle after battle while he was all alone. Zimivee had never operated alone, had never thought he might someday. But he was, he had been, and he knew he was liable to continue as such until, by some twist of luck and fate, he finally did find what he was looking for, and could give it all a rest. Turning from the scene, Zimivee paced to a drooping partition and used it to descend to the floor of the bay, where he could see more of what he had to deal with in order to reclaim his seraph. The fact that he was now surrounded by more than two dozen of the enemy and on their level made things fairly interesting from a tactical perspective.

Taking a walk around the place to sum things up, Zimivee discovered the Hunter-pair, both standing to one side as if anticipatory. Their presence, and apparent lack of gumption to be leaving any time soon made the situation appear hairier than he was prepared to handle- with a sigh, Zimivee left, well knowing if he had any hope of getting back to that seraph and getting it out of the bay intact he was going to have to do something more devious than he was used to- possibly something that would require more than one aching head to think of.

"MÃ¼nâ€| where are you when I need you, old man?" Zimivee muttered, making a corner right as his camouflage auto-shutoff. He paused to look down at it, before continuing, but his mind was not where he wanted it to be- the parts of the past that had led to this place came back, but even going over them again now he didn't find anything of further use. It was all the same, all a part of a whole that had torn him from where he would have been killed and thrust him out alone in the stars, but heading for another place where a new collection of potential allies awaited. The main problem was getting there intact, as the more time went by that he remained alone facing the vast amounts of enemies, the more he felt that corner closing in on his back.

The impenetrability of the wall was to be seen, though- he could only hope there was a backup plan, something he could fall on that would be soft. The closer he got to that point, though, the more he was beginning to think that such a thing didn't exist. He would die out here, and he would die alone. Running from the _Radiant_ had been the only way he knew of at the time to free the rest of the Sangheili there from constant assault so they might get away, and gather where there were more of their own. He hadn't done it for himself. Looking back, he realized he had yet to do anything for himself, and now he found there was nothing save himself to do anything for.

How had it come to this? Zimivee squinted at the pattern on the floor beneath his hooves as he walked. So far there seemed no nearer a plan to him that would free up access to his fighter, but he knew better than to try to run in an insertion pod. All his things were on that seraph, all the things he would need if he ever hoped to reach the surface or the Mirrator he only hoped was there.

He paused at the side of a door, trying to make his mind think along the lines that he needed it to. Looking up at the door, he wondered if he couldn't just use another seraph from another bay to retake the bay where the one with all his things sat. There was no way he could cut down two Lekgolo while fending off a hoard of Brutes. He knew Mä'n's swords would cut through anything, but Hunter armor was more than just tough, it was thick- and the blades were only so long. Taking one from his belt, he looked at it, turning it over in his hand to see it from all angles. From somewhere in his backbrain came a new idea. Zimivee turned back the way he had come, all the while fastening grenades together. There were only so many he could affix to the center one, but if there was one thing he had come to understand about the pressurized plasma inside the grenades, it was once the fuse was lit and the pressure began to build to the bursting point, there was nothing going to crack it open until it detonated all on its own.

By the time he was ready to reintroduce himself to the bay, his camouflage had cooled, so he flipped it on. He didn't need to be shot to death before he could execute his plan. Stepping up to the edge of the veranda near the sloping partition he had used to descend to the floor of the bay, he began to prime the grenades he had clustered, one by one. By the time the last one was active, time was almost out on the first. Extending his arm, he dropped them over the edge, a fiercely glowing ball of superheated gaseous explosives all ready to pop at once.

But they didn't- the first one to go off blew the rest off in all directions, but due to the length of their fuses, some only flew so far before detonating in mid-air. Brutes, Jackals and Grunts were peeled open in an unforgiving spray of flak, plasma and fire. Things once holding tight were blown loose, things once whole were shredded, metal and flesh alike, and something buried in the slagged metal but close to the surface erupted as well, as if for good measure. Zimivee backed away from the edge, alarmed. He had expected something explosive, something fit to clear a good portion of the room, but it seemed the room itself was going up, metal catching fire in places and melting all over again. Grenades attached to the belts of those unfortunate few near enough to the explosions also detonated, throwing up a brand new chain reaction of detonating hazard. Zimivee peeked out, and grinned. That worked better than he had hoped.

Taking Mä'n's swords in hand, he jumped down, even as the last of it all settled again and a deathly still descended on the room. A quick look around told him the Hunters, while hurt, had survived well enough to put up a fight, and both were looking for something to blame, something to kill, for the malady that had befallen their fellow crewmates. Zimivee waited until they both had turned the other way, then hit the remote activation switch for the anti-gravity beam on the seraph, and jumped in. He didn't want to fight them, didn't need to be wounded worse than he already was, near to incapacitated by the one blow he had least needed to take.

Once inside, he quickly deactivated the beam, but it was already too late. Rods of energy strafed the hull, the sound of the metal boiling audible even from the inside. Zimivee dropped into the pilot's seat and began to charge the engines, jerking the craft from the next volley barely in time, but slamming it into the wall of the bay for

the trouble. Cursing under his breath, he had to work the little fighter back and forth four times to free it from the collapse he had caused that was pinning him where he was, and the first thing that greeted his ship when he erupted from the wreckage was more cannon fire from the Lekgolo. They were mad, and he was handy, he knew, but this was beginning to get on his nerves. Activating the turrets, he aimed them back, but the fore and port guns promptly melted off and hit the bay floor when the Hunter's aim found them. Irritated, he slammed the brakes on, reactivated the anti-grav lift and dropped back into the bay. If they wanted to play dirty, he could play dirty.

The instant the lift came on, the Hunters threaded the beam with their fire, but Zimivee slipped down between shots so when his hooves touched the floor he was warm, merely, and his shields were slightly dented. Activating MÃ¼n's swords simultaneously, he leapt at the pair, snapping into view as his camouflage engine overheated early and shut off. Coming down on the shoulders of the first one, he slashed wildly, uncaring for style or fatality of each hit. He successfully shredded the torso of his target, for all the good it did, spilling worms all over the place in a writhing heap.

The other Hunter roared in rage at the loss of its bond-brother, and swung its heavy metal shield at him. Zimivee ducked, flattening his body to the floor nearly to avoid the blow. He was back on his hooves again inside a blink, well aware he could be crushed with a followup hit if he didn't. Launching again, he impacted the second Lekgolo hard enough to stagger its balance, and as soon as he had it where he wanted it, he carved an enormous hole in its chest armor, and the symbiotic worms within as well. Cutting free the helmet, and slicing off the arms, he stepped back to watch that one too melt into a mass of nonsentient annelids.

Turning, he looked around for other enemy, but seeing none, he looked up at the hovering seraph they had nearly shot out of the air. Much of the hull looked badly blistered, some of it thinned to a dangerous depth, making atmospheric entry a bad idea, and the loss of the guns made dogfighting, especially interaction in any scale of furball, especially inadvisable. He sighed- it would have to do. Stepping forward, he touched the controls that would open the bay to space, and paused to look out at the stars for a moment before continuing. He could see several of the Human vessels, now, and parts and pieces of many others, Human and Covenant alike. He sighed, wearily, and shook his head. It was all fruitless- the Humans were going to die, to a man, and then their world would be glassed over. What happened when the Human distraction disappeared was to be seen, thoughâ€¦ the separatist movement seemed a small and distant thing.

A Covenant heavy cruiser loomed into view, parted at a seam, and exploded, a second cruiser almost identical to it sliding through the sparkling remains. Zimivee's mandibles opened. Suddenly it didn't seem quite as small as it had before, but the scene was replaying all around them; Humans shooting at cruisers, cruisers shooting at one another, and at the Humans sometimes, the Orbital Defense Grid reduced to half what it had once been and firing wildly into the mess.

He turned and ascended the anti-grav beam, well aware the chances of his little seraph making it through that fray were smaller than it surviving atmospheric entry. Once inside, he quickly swapped out the

power nodes in the energy blades, and reattached them to his belt. He had turned to the pilot's seat when he heard the anti-grav beam change tone, and spun back again, one sword activating in a brilliant flare of light, to greet whoever dared to enter his seraph. Master had given it to him, and he was sad to let go of it, the craft and the blades the only things left to him that were reminiscent of when he still had friends. The circular doors parted, and a lone little Unggoy surfaced, facing him with penetrating black eyes.

He tilted his head, a little confused at first, but he maintained his guard just in case. Unggoy could possibly be the most dangerous of the creatures the Covenant had recruited, by mere fact that they were too easily dismissed and overlooked. "Me going with you." The Grunt said.

"No. Now get out." Zimivee disagreed. "Find your own ride."

"You kill me?" The diminutive creature asked.

Zimivee sighed. "No, you're a waste of power or ammo." He thought about it for a moment, then added, "Or effort. Get out of my seraph."

The Unggoy crossed its little arms. "No. You no make it down alone, so me go with you. Me serve with your kind before, me knows how you think."

"I doubt it." Zimivee muttered, settling into the pilot's seat and strapping in.

The Unggoy dropped into the copilot's seat, and ran its eyes over the display. "You little ship in bad way."

"No argument there."

"You come here alone, like this?" The Unggoy spared a look at the supplies in the back. "Me no see more Elites."

"You won't, either." Zimivee answered, taking the vessel out of the bay. "Did the Grunt in the Command Chamber send you?"

"No, who that be?"

Zimivee gave his companion a look, for the first time seeing the creature was not, after all, wearing black, but rather red, with a thick layer of soot on top. He gave it a speculative expression. "You were in that bay waiting for me, weren't you?"

The Grunt looked away. "Me follow leaders. We always do."

"Do you have a name?" Zimivee asked.

His gaze was met, then. "Me have name. Me called Shay."

"Shay. And do you know how much soot you are wearing, Shay?"

The Grunt swatted at an arm, unconsciously. "Me shielded by Brute, there no much of him left now."

"I'm sure." Zimivee looked down at his controls. He had gotten so

used to the feel of the instrument that he was flying them towards the planet before them without paying much mind to what his hands were doing; that had to end if he intended to navigate the furball happening around it, though, so he focused forward. "What crazy notion got into your head to make you think I wouldn't kill you too, when you stepped aboard my fighter?"

Shay shrugged, peering out the window. "Me not knowâ€¦ but me follow gut. Me always follow gut, me be okay if me follow gut."

Zimivee gave a disinterested grunt. He had been disenchanted by the workings of the mind back when he was still aboard the Command Station where all his old friends were, what there was of them. The crazy nut who had made an art of the practice had some interesting talents, but he couldn't use them and had long since past stopped thinking he might. If the Grunt beside him had a good gut, that was fine, but instincts only got one so far.

4. Optimistically Speaking

****4: Optimistically Speaking****

****November 5, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****East Africa, Earth****

The first sign that he was still alive was the sharp pain that awoke him. Zimivee groaned in frustration as the rest of his brain came back online. Slowly as he drug his carcass off the ground, the memory of landing and just prior to that came back to him, telling him why and how he had come to this. Casting a look skyward, he saw several phantoms zipping by, but his location, while harboring the occasional half-consumed corpse, was barren and devoid of occupants. Spotting the trench his seraph had dug as it came to a stop, he began to move that direction, wondering if he would find anything worth the salvage, or if Shay was even still alive.

"Someone must really and truly hate me." Zimivee muttered aloud, sliding down into the gouge in the dry, arid earth. "Gods know death is far preferable to this slow torture." The remains of the craft came into view soon enough, and he saw immediately that it was wrecked beyond repair, and it would never fly again. He shook his head, well knowing he could easily be in need of such a craft if he ever came upon entrenched enemy. And though it was obvious the Brutes had taken this area, they had also apparently left it, disinterested in the terrain. Bomb craters littered the vicinity, but from where he was at the bottom of the impact scoring his seraph had made, Zimivee could see only sky. Reaching the ruin, he was able to enter through the torn hole in the back, and though it was tilted enough for him to need to hold on to the left wall to walk deeper in, there were still things perched where he had put them when the craft was better condition.

One look at the cockpit told him why he had come awake so far from the vessel- it had been inverted through the middle of the machine, and it now lay behind the aft where he had entered- what remained was smears of engine lubricant and coolant, and a steaming white-hot fuel core that had cracked and was slowly losing capacity. Looking back through the ship, he was surprised to see someone looking back, and

to that end, surprised to see that Shay had made it down in better condition than himself.

The Grunt seemed fine, by all respects, but Zimivee knew without looking that his armor was scored and dented, punctured in places, and where his vest stopped over his lower back an injury he couldn't define the specifics of and didn't care to annoy his balance. Shay, for all it seemed, was only missing some soot. "You okay, Leader?"

"I'm aliveâ€¦ I'm okay." He responded. He was about to move when a terrible sound caught both of their attentions, and instead he leaned out to see up, in time to witness not one but two heavy cruisers plowing through self-generated clouds of angry gasses and flames. One was speared through the other, and both were destined to find deep graves somewhere in the ocean basin to the east. Already the waters had begun to toss and boil, steaming and flash-vaporizing many thousand meters in front of the falling duo.

"That look like it hurt." Shay mentioned, quietly. "What we do now?" He was holding on to the seraph's torn aft hull, even though the craft was shaking worse than the ground beneath it for the spacecraft sailing over their heads.

Zimivee shrugged, holding on as well- there was nothing else to hold to, and he was still inside, if just, and would have been shaken out if he didn't deliberately jump out. "I came here because I was looking for the Mirratord." He admitted.

Shay made a face behind his mask. "You just looking for you own kind, or you want trouble? Them what claim that title usually do so in wake of big deathâ€¦ they kill you too, you know."

"I know what I'm doing. You stay close or go your own way- but don't be trying to follow me at some kind of distance. If you're not with me then you're not with me, and that's the end of that."

"I told you I'm going with you." Shay said, indignant. "Me no leaving now- me no have nowhere else to be."

"You used to work for the Brutes. How do you expect me to trust you that easily?" Zimivee countered. "I know I'm not that charismatic, and you aren't that stupid. So what's the deal? I want this settled here and now."

Shay nodded, understanding. But he knew he had no chance of getting anywhere, let alone through miles of open empty barren battlefield, by himself. He had already had this discussion with himself, before he'd opted to jump into the seraph that now lay wrecked and baking in the east African sun. Survival came before any loyalties- next to this came the fact that any Brutes he tried to join were liable to kill him to be sure he wasn't carrying a Flood spore. "Me no shoot you in back. Me know what good that get me- you right. Me no stupid. I'm with you."

Zimivee shook his head. Grunts were the universe's biggest enigma.

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At first he had hoped to see some form of life almost right away, but this proved to not be the case as he found himself isolated in the prison with no walls. He couldn't have imagined a bleaker, emptier landscape, if it did have holes pounded into it, dunes here and there, and baked, fried and vaporized remains every five to seven miles or so. What had once been forms of vegetation had been cooked off by plasma fire or chewed to pieces by the bullets Human weaponry belched. There was less left here than he had at first thought.

But if this was Earth— if this was what the Human's Homeworld looked like, why in creation were they bothering to fight for it? They had greener colonies than this! It seemed the place had already been glassed, several years prior. He didn't even see any desert-life, though in the wake of a battle as bad as what he was imagining to fit with the damages he could spy, he would not have come out again either were he one of the indigenous life forms. It simply wasn't worth it, nor was there any incentive.

Glancing back, Zimivee watched as Shay paddled steadfastly through the shifting topsoil— which was a loose, dusty sand— atop the hard-packed, cracked earth that he doubted would give way were he to try to dig through it. Wherever Zimivee left tracks, Shay would shuffle through them, covering them with his own, walking single-file with the Elite he had thrown his luck in with.

At times it felt as if there was nothing but rock-hard, unforgiving flats to traverse, but then they would give way to walls of moving sand that they had to virtually swim through to pass. Though broad, Zimivee felt the terrain was ill suited to hooves of his nature. He had begun to feel the heat off the ground through the soles of his boots long ago, but the heat reflecting off the bleached white sands around him made his armor feel more like a personal custom cut oven.

Ripples of heat flowed past ahead, to either side and behind them, with sign of neither reprieve nor shade. The scenario went on for more miles than he felt it had a right to, cresting the horizon in three of the four directions— the fourth way was the ocean, a force of nature he had long ago learned to avoid regardless of what planet he was on. There would need to be more than mere dry, scorching heat and skinning sandpapered air blowing at him to make him go to the ocean. But for shade— he would have given the whole Human planet for a spot of shade. Zimivee wondered if he wouldn't cook inside his armor, and be ground slowly out of it by the wind.

Looking upwards, he peered out of one eye at the sun, measured the hand-widths between it and the horizon, and gauging by the distance of the planet from the star and the moon it had in orbit, he guessed there would be another eight hours left of daylight to bear before nightfall. He sighed, and looked ahead again, blinking the spot out of his vision as he walked. His back had long ago stopped feeling moist, but the hard, cracked sheath of congealed blood was stabbing into his injury like a thousand tiny razors.

At least it wasn't bleeding anymore.

Shay gave up and sat down with two more hours of hot sunshine left to endure, panting and gasping, and unable to assimilate the methane being fed into his mask for the heat exhaustion. Glad for the excuse to stop, Zimivee sat hard in the dust next to him, and rested his

elbows on his thighs. "I had assumed there was more water on this planet than sand, when I first heard the reports back from the front." He mentioned, gasping in his own right. His entire respiratory tract felt dried and gummy, his mouth tasted foul and there was enough grit between his teeth to give them a diamond edge. Even his eyes hurt, dried from the constant hot, dry wind that stirred the loose sands.

"It is seventy percent ocean." Shay answered, wheezing. "But there are two major deserts that span the widths of their respective continentsâ€¦ and you appear to have found one of them."

Zimivee grinned mirthlessly at the Grunt, and the expression caused the smaller creature to immediately assume a state of silence. Zimivee was in no mood to humor Human geography when the subject revealed what was obviously a fluke of nature- there was no way he had aimed for this horrid spot of all of them on the Human map, but then his ship had not been in the best of conditions when he first left the Contritious Action. It was also revealed as painfully evident that this was the last place on the accursed planet where he would find anything remotely Mirratord.

Worse, he was in no condition to go stealing something from the Brutes and he was less than likely he would get away with it if he did get that far. By the time the sun was down, he had passed out from heat exhaustion, but by dawn, he had felt ice form in his veins and had to unbury himself from the sand that was collecting in a new dune right on top of him. Dusting Shay off, he pushed the Unggoy to his feet, and into motion. There was no purpose to be served by staying where they were, even though traveling through the wasteland on foot was proving more of a battle than he had anticipated upon arrival.

By the following night what appeared to be the edge of the accursed sand looked to be in sight- in Zimivee's mind, he was beginning to think the ocean would have been far kinder. But with something that looked green in sight, he wasn't turning back. Shay kept up well enough, but the supplies they had been able to carry from the seraph were growing smaller due to the increased environmental stress they were needing to withstand. He hadn't drunk this much liquid and not needed to in turn void it again in years- it went down his throat and out his pores at almost the same speed, or so it felt. Shay drank less, but only because his air supply was not dried and devoid of substance. Breathing became a scratchy, painful practice for Zimivee, but he couldn't rightly stop. Sand collected in the seams of his armor and worked its way down between his armor and the undersuit, but it was also in the process of getting under the undersuit, too.

Having nowhere to hide during the day and nothing to keep from being buried by the sand by night, the pair alternately burned and froze on the shifting sands of the desert, until at last the edge came to view as more than smears of color in the heat waves rolling over the earth. Zimivee moved for it, unconsciously increasing his speed as he did so, out of patience for sand and its machinations. Somewhere, there had to be a pool, something he could rinse off in, and rid himself of the invading dirt that had been trying so hard just to whittle him down to nothing for the entirety of his stay. He drew up short, though, when he discovered behind the stand of rain trees and their collective undergrowths was squatting a phantom, and gathered

around the pool in the middle of the vegetation were the Brutes that had ridden the machine.

Shay waddled up beside the Elite, and danced from foot to foot, testing the heat beneath them and wishing nothing more than a cooler place to stand. He only realized the mood of his companion when he heard the swords activate and realized the shadow beside him had suddenly disappeared. Hot sunlight streaked through Zimivee's camouflaged form, but his semi-visibility made that light refract, and he became more of a mini sun than anything inconspicuous.

"Oh, no." Shay groaned, sitting down in defeat as he watched that mini sun charge at the Brutes that would deny Zimivee his much needed, much sought reprieve. He was fed up with sand, sick of being so overheated, and tired to death of being trapped where there was nothing but ones' self for more miles than one could count. In the end he was angry that after spending five days in the desert, unprepared for desert travel, he be denied his relief. The Grunt watched as the Brutes tried to comprehend that a piece of the sun had come down and was shredding them, but the situation made more sense to them when Zimivee passed under the shadow of one of the trees, and his luminous radiance winked out entirely- until he stepped back out into the sun, at which point he became too much to look at again. Shay wondered if it weren't this alone that kept the Brute's partially recovered wit from shooting him down.

The last Brute fled to the phantom, trying to escape a thing he couldn't focus on, but Zimivee saw what he intended and raced him there- the pair shot up into the craft together, but even as Shay got up and headed for the pool, the bits of Brute floated back down again, without the phantom having moved an inch. Zimivee appeared soon enough, but he did so without the camouflage that had done something far more than it had been intended. Shay was grateful, being thus able to look upon the Elite without burning his eyes out. Sitting back down in the pool, Shay smiled up at the larger creature from behind his mask. "The water is fine."

Zimivee gave a genuine laugh, before wading into the liquid himself. It proved warm, but it was wet, and for now that would do. Uncaring who was watching and uncaring if another attack came, Zimivee stripped off his sanded armor and the suit he wore beneath it. It took some doing, but he eventually got the whole thing rinsed out well enough as well as his own skin. Despite being warm enough to irritate his scraped skin, the water was still a nice reprieve from the constant assault the sand had worn into him. The scrapes and scratches and dents in his armor had smoothed, buffed down and shallowed out. Added to this was the more prominent fact that all color was gone from the outfit, sanded off long ago. Even Shay was reduced to the metal beneath the paint on the armor he wore, the leaf-shaped tank on his back more of a shiny steel color now than the red it had been. Zimivee looked a lot like an Ultra once he was back in costume, however, as the metal alloy used in Elite armor was more of a copper color. The worst part between them was both were now reflective as mirrors- if the images reflected therein were grainy and spotted.

"You look nice." Shay offered, still up to his neck in the water. He was having to hold onto a tree's root to stay that far down, though, as methane was more buoyant than he liked at the moment.

"I look dishonorable." Zimivee corrected. "It makes me out to look like something I am not- I can only hope to not be mistaken for as much by any that see me before I can correct them."

Shay bobbed his head in partial agreement and partial dismissal. In truth he didn't care what he looked like, so long as that look involved being animate and alive. "What we do now?"

"I'm going to take that phantom and have a look at the current status of any resistances going on here on this planet. Maybe I can easier locate the ones I have been looking for then." Zimivee pointed at the ship. "In any case, I am not doing any more walking for as long as I can help it."

Shay looked over at the phantom, then up at Zimivee. "Me go with you?"

"Unless you're committed to that bath you're sunk in, I assumed you were, so yes." He answered, tucking the last of the salvageable things he had taken from the Brutes' bodies into the satchel he had lifted from one of them. Standing, he breathed a sigh, spared the locale a look, then walked for the lift beam. Shay released the root, and bobbed on the surface long enough to dip his head. With the last rinse he could afford, the Grunt bounded out of the water in pursuit of the Sangheili warrior.

"I'm with you!"

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In a day of looking, Zimivee was able to locate most of the sources of each transmitting channel. It didn't take him long to figure out that any and all Human forces had been pushed back far enough so they were isolated from one another in pocket resistance and often weren't communicating- but what got his interest was when he listened to them, he heard Sangheili voices in the static, as wellâ€¦ they had aligned with what remained of Humanity to stop the Prophet Truth from getting at something.

What that something was he never could catch, though, as whatever they were calling it the pronunciation, tone and treble was all wrong to get the word past the static. Some words, like get, go, me, I, wait, and retreat just didn't get past the white noise. Figuring he was sitting behind some kind of electromagnetic barrier, he turned to the controls that flew the phantom to move it closer to the signals so the static would quit being such an interfering bother.

Right as he had sat down, he heard the comn system auto connect with a separate line, and the gruff, grating voice of a Brute commander piped through. _"Where are you? You should have reported in by now!"_ Nothing new, he sounded unhappy. Zimivee often wondered if the creatures understood the concept.

Reaching over, he keyed the responding toggle to answer. "Heading in now." It was true- if to a point. And unless the idiot Brute noticed how what had been said was spoken, the comment would make the commander look all the more the fool to whoever was listening on the other side when he finally did figure it out.

No such luck. _"You are not Jiralhanae! What have you done with my

Brutes? Who are you? How did you get past them alive?" _

Zimivee tipped his head back and thought. Glancing back at the little Unggoy, he smiled in contemplation. "â€|in darkness we will see light, in light we will see darknessâ€|"

He heard the Brute roar at him, angered. _"You will never survive this world, filthy Sangheili Mirrator'd wretch! We have killed all your brethren and you will follow them to their shamed graves among the despicable Humans!" _

"I wouldn't be so quick to judge, considering your Brutes gave me this pretty bird for free." Zimivee mentioned, activating the engines to start zeroing in on some of the more frantic radial signals. The Brute he was speaking to had done naught but confirm what he had already surmised on his own- find some Humans, likely find a couple of Sangheili as well. The odds of them being Mirrator'd were slim, as the legend was not the road-side country club that had a million members, most of which never saw the place twice. Out of what he had gathered from the sketchy intel he had heard of them, there were reputedly only a handful, and these kept to themselves, hidden away for most of their lives.

"_We will shoot you down soon enough. It is no matter. The Great Journey is nigh and nothing any of you fools do will stop that." _

The calm in the proclamation gave the Elite pause. He spared the com'n unit a suspicious look. "Nigh? Couple of hours, then? Why are you all here pounding on the Humans if they'll all be burned out of their armor in the flames of said journey anyway?"

"_I do not expect a filthy heretic Sangheili to understand the motives of the Prophets. You will burn with them, and the Brutes, not the Elites, shall be swept along at their side as escorts!"

_

Zimivee rolled his eyes, and shut the device off. He had lost his enthusiasm for the Prophet's words, their predictions and machinations, long, long ago. The Great Journey, he was sure, was just one more tool that had been conjured as incentive to make the soldiers of the Covenant do as the Prophets bid. If it turned out to be linked to an actual event, there was very likely nothing great about it and quite possibly no real journeying involved either. He looked up from his thoughts when Shay plopped down in the seat across from his, the co-pilot's chair. The Unggoy wormed down into it, trying to attain a posture that wouldn't cause his skeletal frame injury, as the item had not been designed to hold a Grunt. Grunts didn't do much in the way of flying or operating military assault machines, though the occasional one would be found at a stationary cannon, or the lucky one might have found an empty ghost to ride on.

Zimivee watched the spectacle for a time, then shook his head and looked away. The creature had questionable loyalties, at best, and the same could be said for any of Amam's crew that got off the Contritious Action in time. Focusing on his hands as he closed them around the controls, Zimivee realized how shallow he was being- did he not also at one time pledge his allegiance to what now had become his sworn enemy? Did he not once serve with those he was now battling

against, and against those he now sought to join? He closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves. There would be time for this later- always later- for now he needed to concentrate and stay focused if he ever intended to remain alive and relatively intact for very long at all. Reopening his eyes, Zimivee plotted in a course and raised the phantom into the Earthen sky to propel it along that path with all due haste. There was somewhere in that mess, that fray, where he could be useful, somewhere where the same people he was accused of being one of actually were.

On the outside, Shay watched the Elite pause as if in reflection, and dismissed it as a short prayer to the ancestors of Sangheili history before flying them straight down the mouth of the Brute machine that was currently gnawing on the rest of the planet. Tucking his head, Shay allowed himself to ignore the warrior, his mind descending to the point that any observer might think him asleep- when in fact he was more aware than he had been when alert and active a moment before.

Together, yet worlds apart, the two flew for the cruiser parked over the billows of dark black smoke in the south. Anywhere else would be less than what either sought.

5. To Wish Upon A Dying Star

****5: To Wish Upon a Dying Star****

****November 9, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****Southeast Africa, Earth****

Dawn broke through clouds of ash and smoke larger than the mountains and volcanoes profiled in the west. The steppes at their feet gave the scene a rather uneven, broken look, and with the portions of the cruiser hovering over the grounds to the south the new day painted a grim picture indeed. Zimivee committed some time to the study of the layout, not wanting to go tearing across miles of enemy territory that would rise up behind him and squash him between fronts.

Due to the atmosphere's tortured condition, the weather was becoming erratic and unpredictable, storms welling up out of down-swept cold air from the upper layers and pulled warm air from below with all the enormous ships flying through it. Lightning played across the hull of the cruiser in the distance, but it didn't show signs of caring. Rain swept across Zimivee's phantom in sheets, but he wasn't flying it through the front view anyway, and despite being unable to see through the mess, he kept a good pace following the ship's sensors. Away from the Chalbi Desert, and making good time across the greener northern end of the Masai Steppes, he had already seen the smoldering remains of three Human cities, sacked and leveled by the Brutes. All fighting had migrated farther south, and he had a long ways to go yet. Hopefully, he wouldn't arrive too late to do much beyond die with the last of them when they were wiped out.

Kirinyaga loomed in the west, a skylined profile he couldn't seem to pass up. At approximately 5,199 feet high, the mountain was keeping its peak above most of the dust and smoke being blown off the ground below. It wasn't that interesting to him, barring that he knew if he ever ended up back aground he would need landmarks like that to keep

from getting lost- Earth was a confusing hodgepodge of tectonic wonder- most of the fissures and mountain ranges he had seen made the place look like a nightmare to traverse if one's only means was one's own feet. Too many things were rent in sheer drops and rises, too much to go around and over or under rather than through, among other things. Having discovered one of the smaller deserts firsthand, he understood a little more about what it meant to be Human- any creature evolved on a planet like this one had to be more than athletic, more than strong, fast and flexible. Dorenth was nothing like this. Not that the ground there was level and plumb, but at least it was more towards reasonable.

What he knew of Humans, they tended to be beyond clever and quick, often rising above anything the Covenant of the day had been able to throw at them while aground. It was only their space-faring technology that paled in comparison. Zimivee had never met one, though, and hadn't ever really wanted to, but being more or less trapped on their home planet made that feature something of a given. More so, since there were Humans keeping company with Elites. He only hoped all of the little creatures knew about that detail, though, as the last thing he needed was to run into the one bunch that still thought Sangheili were the enemy too. Having Human blood on his weaponry wouldn't go over well with whatever other group he encountered after the fact.

Turning the radio back on, he listened to it in silence for a time, trying to figure out what exactly was going on ahead. A recent wave of Brutes had hammered the front lines of nearly all the entrenchments, but one of them hardest of all.

Somewhere farther from the coast, and farther south. There would be little left of them, he mused, but currently he was listening to the Brutes issuing more troops to that location for a second hit. Something about seismic sensors having picked up a large cavern they wanted to infiltrate, but hadn't gained access to yet. So the Humans had underground bunkersâ€¦ to have been pushed down into them, though, was bad, and it meant bad things for those about to be hit for the second time by enemy reinforcements, and that was if there were still Brutes on the ground at the site from the last assault wave.

There was at least one Brute that knew he was there, possibly even where and to where he was heading, as per tracking the phantom, but they couldn't know his intentions. He wondered briefly if he could get a word through to ask if anything remotely akin to what he sought was among the besieged bunker's troop complement. Looking over at the Grunt, he contemplated his next move. If he made the call, even an unsuccessful one, the Brutes would know what he was up to if they were listening- and doubtless they were. But it seemed the Humans were listening too, and if he didn't wait until they were all dead to try, one or two might hear and answer. Since he had an armed air assault vehicle, there were things he could accomplish to clear a landing that they couldn't- even heading off the next wave of Brute troops.

If he even dropped just one of their carrier birds, they would have likely lost enough to make the rest angry and want to pursue him rather than complete their flyover and dropoff. But he wasn't going to risk being shot out of the sky unless he had something to run to if and when he was done with them or if he did get shot down and

survived the crash. Focusing forward, he toggled the comm unit to transmit and receive on Human frequencies.

Shay lifted his head in time to hear the warrior beside him speak into the radio. "Airborne phantom heading south by southwest, nose to carrier. Any Sangheili or Human forces respond." It was a bold move- but the Grunt understood this was the part that they had been heading toward all along. This was where the Elite got off- and Shay was either on his own or going to join the same forces- the losing side of a war, he noted sourly- but he knew in his soul there was only one thing that would make that happen.

Zimivee turned his head to look at the Grunt, his motions catching the Elite's eye, but neither had any time to process the information garnered from the exchange of glances. Within moments of sending the call, the Brutes had zeroed their location, and an alarm began to shriek at them. Plasma fire, incoming- hot and fast.

Surprised at the speed of the response, Zimivee stumbled over his responding action and the phantom tumbled rather than swerved out of the way. They lost more than a hundred feet of altitude before he could recover, but once he had the bird level again he realized what he was looking at; the cruiser hadn't fired those rounds, a swarm of seraphs had. And they were closing on his position fast. Growling, Zimivee turned the phantom broadside to stall his momentum, then dove them towards the ground. The distance between ships would allow him a great lot of options as for what to do about them, but he was in no mood to humor a ruined ship. He had already strained his luck to the breaking point by surviving the seraph he'd left in smoldering pieces back on the other side of the Chalbi. He also had no intention of doing too much more walking on that gods-forsaken crust the Humans called their home.

He wasn't Human, and he wasn't built to withstand that sort of environmental torture. It really was no wonder the Covenant had always had such problems with the annoying species. As planned, and like idiots, the seraph fighter's pilots followed him down, but at thirteen feet above the terrain he pulled up and leveled off- then hit the throttle and shot right under them as they flowered out in barrel rolls and loops attempting to come about.

Touching the comm, Zimivee stated, "This isn't funny!"

"_I find no mirth in your presence here either, filthy Sangheili."_

Zimivee snarled at the device, actually inclined to promise the presumptuous Brute his death, but he had no honest idea where said creature could be found, and he doubted he would find out by asking. "Silence!" He snapped. "I will not listen to your lies."

The Brute just laughed. To someone else, he could be heard to say, "_Make sure the body of this one is recovered. I will enjoy watching the Flood tear him apart and turn him into something else."_

Revulsion welled up in Zimivee's stomach like bile, and he nearly puked on the controls. The Covenant were deploying Flood, feeding Flood, _harboring_ Flood??? What madness had gripped the Prophets so? Sickened, it took all his strength to hold onto the phantom, all the

while wishing nothing more than to be far from here, far from Earth, regardless of where the Mirrator was. He hadn't fought Flood before, and had heard enough to never want to. The bestial creatures were worse than Brutes. They had no sense of self, and no instincts— all they knew was how to kill and infect the living creatures around them. And even if pushed back to a single form, they would always come back. Flood didn't stop. Flood never stopped.

Seeing Zimivee's distress, Shay tapped the control on the comm, changing the channel so the Brute could say no more. It was obvious what the Sangheili was thinking— and Shay didn't need his pilot to become focused on something that would detract from the flying of the bird they were in.

Still, listening to what was coming through _now_ was little better— a dying scream echoed through the cockpit of the phantom, but though Shay grimaced, he noted that Zimivee barely heard it. Shouting in the background became overlain with static, before someone else picked it up and began issuing orders so fast it had to have been a premeditated plan of action. It took several minutes, but Zimivee eventually cast a glance at Shay, having finally registered that something had changed, and knowing it could only be by fault of the Grunt next to him.

Shay took the look— primarily blank but slightly expressive without being readable— as much of a thanks as he was liable to get. But knowing the Elite was grateful for the exchange made some difference. Shay could never see himself as being friends with a Sangheili, but right then it seemed plausible.

Looking back at the displays, Zimivee took a quick reading of where the seraphs were and how fast they were moving and in which directions, then adjusted his own flight path accordingly. The phantom rose in the air after skimming the ground for a mile, accumulating altitude enough to enable all sorts of dodging if it ever became necessary. One by one the seraphs formed up, stressing their engines the same way Zimivee was in an attempt to catch up with him. By his move upon introduction, he had spaced them far enough away to keep them out of weapon's range for long enough to at least decide where he was going to put in at— even if there wasn't enough time to get there and land.

He wished he could divide them up, and pick them off, but in the open there was no conceivable way for a novice pilot to perform such an action. If he had had a mountain range's worth of peaks, that would have been different— a mountain peak was a no-fly zone, and everyone minded them. Out in the open air over a desertscape that was beginning to turn into urban sprawl wreckages and forested region, there were no boundaries, nothing to dodge, nowhere to hide. Nothing to use to scatter the enemy's forces enough for one ship to take out— Zimivee ran his eyes over the number of dots on his screen. Eleven. For one ship to take out eleven.

He sighed. "We aren't going to get far, if our luck maintains."

"I know." Shay agreed, quietly.

"I'm going to put us down inside one of the areas where we won't be immediately bombed from above." Zimivee added, looking for such a place to drop his filched phantom. "Once we're down, we'll need to

run. There's nothing going to stop them from hitting the ship after I've landed it."

"You not going to fight them?"

"I'm not a pilot. And there are too many of them even if I was. I can't win this one, and I'm not about to let them win it by sitting and waiting for them to come kill me."

Shay nodded. "What we do once we on ground?"

"We'll cross that topic when we get to it." Zimivee decided, choosing a place and aiming for it. It was nearby, but once they were down and stopped, they would have spare moments to escape the radar of the Brute's seraph wing. "Your friends on the ship in orbit could all move pretty fast— how about you?"

Shay looked up, startled, to find himself looking into deep dark eyes. Zimivee wanted an honest answer- he wasn't going to drag the smaller creature, and he wasn't going to wait for him, either- but he wanted to know if Shay could keep up. The Grunt nodded. "Me move quick. You point way, me move quick."

"You go sit on the lift doors. You pick your own direction and you run as fast as if your worst nightmare was chasing you. I need to be at the controls and there isn't time to wait for me to get all that done and from here to back there and then to the ground too before we leave." Zimivee corrected. "I'll follow your trail if I find it. If not, this is where we part ways."

Shay gave that some thought. "What you going to do, all alone?"

"Same thing I have always done, Shay." Zimivee answered, his tone soft. "It has been a long while since I fought beside brothers. You should not fear for me."

"Me not fear for you." Shay decided. "But me do fear for what happen to you mind, being so long alone surrounded by enemy all the time. You not last long, not by any stretch of term, not alone."

"Just get back there and sit." Zimivee frowned.

Shay lifted out of his seat and waddled towards the gravity lift door. Standing on it he looked down past his feet, and wondered briefly if he could make his own way, without more powerful support. Something told him he might make it past the first landmark alone, but if he even half expected to live out the week he would need to re-ally himself with someone. Even if that meant going back to the Brutes.

He looked up when the phantom shuddered, the tremor evoking an expletive from it's pilot even as he jammed the controls in an attempt to not be smoldering wreckage when they hit dirt. The hull pulsed to the rhythm of the turrets beneath Shay's feet, pounding out plasma at the seraphs making strafing runs past them as they descended.

He was about to ask if Zimivee had gotten something other than landing and taking off on foot in mind, when the field activated and

the doors beneath him whisked out of the way. With a startled shriek the little Grunt was dropped through the gravity lift's length, but being as the phantom was too far up, he was dumped out into freefall when he reached the bottom of the beam- luckily this proved to only be about twenty feet or so, but it still hurt when he hit, tumbling along after the wake of the bird that had just disgorged him. Out of his mind and out of his wits, the only thing that made sense when he came back to his feet was to try to chase the phantom down- so he did.

Shay put all he had behind his pursuit, running along on all four of his limbs and cooking across the uneven ground for all he was worth. He looked up in time to see something on the prow of the vessel peel up and come loose to flip over the back. The Grunt barely had enough time to dodge the flying shrapnel before it might have lacerated him directly in half. Recovering from the loss of speed and direction, Shay paused to look up after the receding ships. He lifted an arm to block the searing brilliance of an explosion granted the phantom's aft, then watched it hail hard to the right, before digging a wing fin into the earth and plowing up a dozen trees before tipping over and coming to rest on it's back. Shay stared hard, trying to pick a Sangheili silhouette out of the haze of up-flung dirt and smoke, hoping to see something. Instead he watched as the Covenant seraphs began to make passes over the fallen phantom, laying down enough fire to make sure it would never fly again. Soon, enough of the hull would have boiled away that one of them was going to hit something vital, and then the phantom was going to erupt in a giant ball of expanding flak and fire.

Shay turned from the smoldering wreck, and began to retrace his steps, noting the distance between tracks as he did so. There was enough space to comfortably place four of his kin elbow to elbow on the ground between each, but there were more important things to think about than how fast he could go. Catching a whiff of something familiar, Shay raised his head, and spent several minutes studying his surroundings before spotting something pulling off the ground a fair ways back.

The Grunt grinned behind his mask as he watched the battered Elite stagger to one side before regaining his balance, more than a little dazed from his tumble. When Shay caught up to where he was, he scowled at the smaller creature. "What are you doing still here?" He demanded.

"Me not know. Me justâ€¦ you be hurt?"

Zimivee turned away, sniffing. "I'm fine." Sparing the environment a brief survey, he started in a direction that seemed odd to Shay. There was a steep but short incline they had to crest to go much farther in that direction than a couple yards, but after having passed the miniature cliff the Grunt decided it was rather an ideal direction, as it was an unlikely one. It was also highly likely not going to be the first way any pursuing ground teams might go if they found the pair's tracks in the shuffled dirt under the falling phantom's flight path.

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Wandering more or less aimlessly for several hours finally produced the remnants of a Human city, but Zimivee was reluctant to commit to

the terrain when it proved to harbor a Jiralhanae blockade and a small amount of fighting in one distant corner. The crackle of Human gunfire echoed down deserted streets, and was drowned out in the areas where Brutes stood watch. Many of them were snarling at one another, squabbles often found in tribes, the occasional bark from a captain or other higher ranking individual causing momentary quiet. Shay didn't want to offer any reconnaissance work, but he knew he might very well wind up performing something similar eventually due to his Covenant Loyalist outfit save the part where all his paint was gone thanks to the Chalbi.

Zimivee didn't say anything, though, simply turning away from the establishment of enemy with a muttered growl under his breath, and led the Grunt down a winding path through the outskirts of the city, often dipping into the forest to continue. Shay wondered briefly what the surly Sangheili was thinking now, but anything asked of the warrior was liable to be rebuked. So Shay hid his curiosity and kept his mouth shut.

After walking the city limits of a standing ruin for another hour, Zimivee chose another location to try penetrating the inner city, activating his camouflage before trotting quickly up the road to the next covered area where he could return to a more inconspicuous path. Following this, he came upon a smaller deployment of the enemy; eight Brutes, five Jackals and a scattering of Grunts. Zimivee looked the encampment over, then looked back at Shay. Here was where things were liable to become interesting.

The Grunt looked up, back at him, but he gave no indication he even knew Zimivee planned to leave a number fewer of the enemy alive in passing this point.

"What are you good for?" Zimivee asked.

"Me good for many things. What you have in mind?" Shay responded.

"I have eight dead Brutes in mind."

"And the Kig-yar?"

"If I can catch them." Zimivee answered.

"You no catch them, they alert whole city you here. You no go in there and announce we here. Me no let you. You want kill them, fine. Me not bothered. But me no want big entrance." Shay informed him.

Zimivee laughed at the Grunt's audacity. But he had a point- even if making it had been irrelevant. "I don't plan on letting them walk easy, Shay, don't get your hoses in a tangle. I am more interested to know what I would be dealing with if your kin here decide to put up a fight."

"Me no leader, me can no persuade them to let you kill their Leaders. But me still not like the idea of you killing them, either."

"You still with me?" Zimivee asked.

Shay sighed. "Yes."

"Then put forth ideas I can use. I don't need your kin running off in a panic and making that big entrance you mentioned, either- so since you've divided your loyalties, tell me how we're going to conduct this. You have five minutes- after that I'm making the decisions and I'm going to kill who needs it, regardless of what species they are." He looked down at Shay. "If you get in my way, that includes you."

Shay nodded. "Me knew that much. Elites no like me kin ever, me no expect you to now. Not when there are Grunts on both sides of this war."

"Oh there are? Who told you that?"

"Rumor." Shay answered, and would say no more.

Zimivee let it drop. "If you mess this up for me, don't complain when we get ambushed later on." He reactivated his camouflage, and stepped out towards the collected enemy. Shay shrugged, and waddled after him. He didn't have any such device, nor could he blend in easy due to what had happened to his armor, but he could amend that last easy enough if one of his own wound up dying. He had just caught the eye of the first Brute when something else caught the creature's attention.

The Brute next to him had just dropped in his tracks, headless. Alarm spread quickly, but so did the damage. Shay pulled up his needler and began firing off explosive shards at all those that he perceived to be getting away, but he had to catch one of the Grunts by an arm as the panicked fellow tried to bolt past him. "You no run! You stay here!" Shay barked.

"He kill us all!" The frightened Grunt responded, pulling against Shay's grasp. "Me no want to die!"

"You run you die, you sit now you stay breathing." Shay told him, leveling his needler at the other Grunt's face. Trembling, with all his focus on the end of that needler, the Grunt slowly sat down, and stayed there. Without moving his aim, Shay turned his head, to watch as Zimivee's camouflage wore out and he faded back into view, his reflective armor shining brightly in reflection of the afternoon sun. Shay watched in awe as the Elite sliced each opponent to smaller, more manageable pieces as he came to each, making sure at the same time that he always went next to the one that seemed to be getting the farthest away.

Zimivee turned towards one Brute and a second tried to grab him, but he sliced free before the grip could cinch- his first target did get a lock, however, and ignored the first stabs of the twin swords to try to twist Zimivee's head off. He bent, and curled, then twisted inside the Brute's grasp enough to bring his body up off the ground and flip it over the Brute's head- with his arms up and pulled back until he let go, the Brute was now also subject to a double whammy through the back of his ribcage, which Zimivee cut him in twain at. Freed, he spared a moment to rub his throat and regain his breath, but when he turned to look back at Shay he realized he had missed one- and the last one proved a doozey, pounding the slight Sangheili with every round in his spike rifle. Zimivee tried to dodge, but he couldn't evade them all, and the last one broke his shields. With nothing between them save their armor, the Brute and the Elite met

hard and fast, one with a set of barrel-mounted metal blades and one with a pair of single-bladed energy swords.

Zimivee took off the arm he thought had the rifle in it, but the Brute took it right out of his own hand and slammed it hard into Zimivee's chest armor. Pitching him off the knives again, the one-armed Brute snarled down at his apparently fallen foe.

"All of your pathetic kind will die like the worthless vermin they are, filthy Sangh-." The Brute began.

All at once Zimivee came off the ground, his vest smeared with fresh blood, and slammed hard into the offending creature he had been felled by. Snarling loud and dangerous, Zimivee didn't care if the entire armada came to watch. He was not going to allow this Brute to so insult his people—he had been letting it slide for far too long.

One blade through his heart and the other through his throat, the Brute could only stare in shock and agony at the warrior pinning his greater mass to the wall of the Human building. "We have something to fight for beyond the lies of a few withered old lizards sitting in grav-chairs! You are not permitted to speak the name of my people, and you will die for the infraction." Zimivee whispered, his voice hoarse and slightly liquid. "For the insult."

Slowly he let the dead carcass slide to the ground, but once it was down he simply turned from it and walked away, ignoring Shay completely— the Grunt was about to follow him when he remembered he was supposed to be keeping one of his own from running away, at which point he realized said individual was no longer there. Slamming a fist into the pavement in frustration, Shay darted after the retreating warrior, a bit surprised he was still standing after a wound like that and expecting him to drop sometime soon.

Zimivee just kept walking— for the most part in plain view of anyone that looked, but still only following the empty back streets where no sentries had been placed. Spotting a dead Grunt with green armor on, Shay paused long enough to swap tanks when he discovered the deceased's was still full of sweet methane. His body armor was still polished and flashy, but at least he wasn't wearing a giant arrow pointing at him that was beyond ridiculously reflective.

"Green?" Zimivee wondered, aloud, after he'd noticed. "Suits you."

"I should think you be shamed of me, wearing color not mine. Me be red, once, before me get polished." Shay replied, astute.

"Your people do what your people do for reasons undisclosed to mine. I do not presume to think you follow my code of honor, nor that you follow my laws. Neither of us hold loyalties, and the Covenant holds none to us." Zimivee answered, tiredly. "You wear what you want to, Shay. I didn't expect you to answer to me anyway."

Humbler, Shay responded, "Me no wear green for sake of wearing green—me wear green for sake of not being mirror." He cocked his little head at the Elite. "You may consider same stance too, you not want to be so noticeable."

"Maybe." Was all the answer Shay got. Zimivee was tired, and wounded now too. The slight injury gained upon crashing on the planet didn't seem to be bothering him anymore, but the dual punctures in his chest could easily become a problem if they continued to bleed- or, Shay pondered, if Zimivee continued to refuse to put his pride aside and _let_ them bleed.

Crossing an old intersection, the pair came to a part of the city that was flattened as much as the heaps of rubble allowed, not a standing wall to be seen for some distance. Here Zimivee would no longer be able to hide in plain sight. Uncaring, or seeming to be uncaring, the Sangheili continued his walk, moving over and past the remains of several buildings.

Finally Shay could hold it in no longer. "What you expect to find but ancestors you wander around with hurt like that on you?" He demanded. "You going to die, you no see to that wound."

"I have nothing to see to them with." Zimivee answered, simply.

Shay growled something in his native tongue.

Zimivee paused, and looked down at him. "What was that?"

Shay looked back, bravely. "You no think you no burn them shut, at least?"

"Burn them shut?" Zimivee asked, a little taken aback by the show of bravado.

Shay pointed, indignant, at one of Zimivee's swords. "You blade hot thing. You burn what you kill with them. Yes? You no need to be pouring blood all over armor, you get smelled out by every Brute in city."

Zimivee activated one blade, cocking his head at the Grunt.

All his show and bluff vanished inside a second, and Shay jumped back, sure he had insulted the Elite's honor or something and was about to be killed for it. Instead, Zimivee spent a moment looking at the bright luminescent blade, as if in thought. Looking down at Shay again, he said, "So that's what you're good for."

6. An Annoying Equilibrium

****6: An Annoying Equilibrium****

****November 9, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****Southeast Africa, Earth****

With just four hours of daylight left to work with, Zimivee wasn't sure if he would ever find what he was looking for. He didn't even have a radio this time, and none seemed readily available. Given his current resources, he figured he might last another few days before needing to raid someone else's stores for the basics- and the more he thought about it, the more he wondered if Shay was right- if he didn't find paint first, he needed to discard his armor for something less reflective and of darker, more discreet quality. They had walked

back out of the city, circumventing the area where the fight had been earlier in the day, but everything was quiet save the insects local to the region and the sound filling up Zimivee's ears was that of his own steps. It seemed he was only capable of impressive stealth when in better health- but that wouldn't do, as the more wounded he became the more stealthy he needed to be.

Despite his own perceptions, Zimivee successfully found another Brute entrenchment without them spotting him first, or at all, and then also successfully bypassed them all without raising a whisper of suspicion. Even toting a clumsy Grunt along, which he counted as more luck than he was normally prone to. Carefully putting distance between himself and aforesaid entrenchment, Zimivee spared a look at the sky to see why it had become dark so early.

Without another stirring of passing cruisers, the atmosphere had collected precipitation and was preparing to rain. Zimivee could only hope whatever substance it dropped on him was of friendly quality, but if he had to hole up somewhere he supposed he wouldn't mind that much. Despite the incoming storm, it was still light enough to see the prow of one of the ships that had chosen the hold position and deploy troops, either in this city or somewhere outside it. Knowing Covenant landing protocol, it was probably over a central hub of some kind, inside the city, and all the damage rendered was from the initial flyover. Unless the Humans had done it, and it was in effort to force the invaders backâ€¦

"Hold it right there, split lip!"

The shout caught him entirely out of sorts and off guard- but he soon spotted the cryer and realized his mistake. Silently he berated himself for not noticing the Human before he in turn was noticed. All his feats of unnoticed passage of the Brutes became irrelevant. Deciding the Human was one of the warrior caste due to the rather trademarked outfit as well as the weapon in it's handsâ€¦ it might be male, but the detail was slightly beside the pointâ€¦ Zimivee narrowed his eyes at the creature, touching the swords at his hips. He didn't have a gun to point back at the Human with, nor were there any lying around. And Shay was lagging behind, and would be a full minute in catching up. Deciding to see if the fact that he hadn't been shot yet meant the creature was willing to talk, Zimivee opted to reply to the order he had been given. "I am not here to make trouble."

The Human- they were called Marines, if Zimivee recalled correctly- steadied his aim into one hand and touched a personal com unit on his shoulder with his freed hand.

>"Control, this is recon Alpha, I found an Elite out here."
<p>

Zimivee cocked his head. A scout team? Better, he mused. A team of one! The Marine waved his gun at him, warning him not to be taking too many liberties with his movements.

"Is he hostile?" Another Human voice piped through the device in reply.

"I'm not getting close enough to find out, but he isn't shooting at me." The Marine answered, looking the lone warrior up and down as if marveling at the fact he was so shiny. Zimivee felt as if he were

being examined like some captured insect.

"C.O. wants you to bring him in. Apparently some of these split lips are working with us."

"Roger that. So what's it gonna be, coppertop, you coming along or you staying out here with the Brutes?" The Marine asked, retaking his rifle with his other hand again.

Zimivee turned his head to see when Shay waddled tiredly up and stopped, letting go a great sigh of releif to be so stopped. It was only afterwards that he spotted the Human standing there and freaked out, sure beyond a doubt it meant he was about to be shot dead.

Zimivee only smiled. "Calm yourself, Unggoy. We have been invited to join this Human and his Leaders."

Shay eyed the Human speculatively. "Me no trust Humans."

"You don't have to." Zimivee said. He leveled his gaze at the Marine, whose aim had lowered, if slightly. "You lead. I follow. And you aim your weapon elsewhere."

The Marine turned, casting them only one glance, and began to walk, leading the alien pair to a nearby building. As they approached, several more Marines melted out of the nearby scenery, proving what Zimivee had suspected all along; the Marine was never really alone. It was just as well. Zimivee had thought it odd to see the Human with what appeared to be no backup whatsoever when all the reports of fighting with them had always included copious amounts of them.

"Look at what you got, brother." A marine commented as he walked up behind Shay and Zimivee. "A rejected Elite, and a two timing Grunt."

Shay bristled at the accusation, hopping about in what appeared to be his best attempt at a swift turn. He snarled at the Human, angrily. "Me no two-timing! You keep you dirty mouth shut or me cut you tongue out!"

"Enough!" Zimivee snapped, fearing to be caught in the middle of a firestorm by the Grunt's hostility, as he seemed the only one of the two that recognized there was no way they could fight their way out of the middle of this swarm. There were simply too many. Not to mention they each and all had weaponry, and all he had that was far-reaching were his grenades. He seized the Grunt by the collar of his chest armor, and yanked him back. "Do not make me hurt you, lest you wish you had never been born!"

"Stay calm!" The Marine shouted in response to the comment. He leveled his rifle, but another Marine quickly pushed the barrel downward.

"Control told me to bring 'em in. That's what I'm doing. You heard the report, we're allies. Like it or not." The Marine that had found Zimivee and Shay looked over the gathering Marines. "Get back to your posts. The Brutes are still looking for us."

Several of the Marines, though not happy about it, dispersed.

"Cross me again, and the Humans will be the least of your concerns, little Unggoy." Zimivee warned, his volume carefully low. The fight had been dispersed- possibly if another commotion arose it would not disband so easily.

"Me no start trouble, me only finish it." Shay pouted, well aware that Zimivee hadn't challenged his compliance to superiors, but rather threatened to kill him. Dissatisfied, but wanting to drop it, Zimivee pushed Shay away from him, leaving the Grunt to finger the claw marks on his collar.

The Marine started speaking again, regaining the Elite's attention. "We've been using guerrilla tactics for the past two days, keeping the Brutes off our tails and away from our bunker." He stopped and turned to look back at Shay. "How well can we trust this Grunt? They don't seem to be fairly trustworthy around these parts. They've been fighting on both sides."

Zimivee's head rose slightly. "I cannot answer your question. The Unggoy made his decision to throw in his fortune with mine when I left the cruiser he was stationed on. As of since then, he has not been tried or tested, and the few times when I encountered enemy I had to kill he only hung back- it is my understanding he is unconcerned with the fighting and may be only looking for something he has yet to name."

The Marine gave him a skeptical look.

"If you wish to confine him to a secure location until such time as you see fit that he poses no threat or you decide to dispose of him, I will not stop you. He is as much on his own as with me." Zimivee added.

"Hey!" Shay protested. "Me no want to be confined! Me not here to be shot like animal just because guard get tired of watching me, either. Me no stand for that." He shook a little fist at the Human in warning. "You no try nothing."

Zimivee looked down at the Grunt.

Shay looked back.

"Need I say it again?" The Sangheili warrior asked.

Shay looked down. "No."

"Good."

The Marine raised a brow at them. "I take it this isn't exactly a team of friends, you come from."

"He was the enemy when I found him." Zimivee answered, looking back at the Marine. "The odds of him dying an enemy are not nonexistent. Nor are they that the last I see of him will not be his lifeless body. I am not here to gather Grunts from the enemy's forces, Human."

"Maybe we should address this later- with the brass. You don't appear

to be in actual conflict, so we don't need to finish this quite as of yet." He looked at the Grunt. "But he can't leave until we know he won't rat out our position, our defenses and our numbers."

The group resumed moving, deeper through Human territory, to a building with a large side door. Nearby were several dozens of camouflaged Marines in sniper and heavy weapons positions, looking out of windows and from inside of flanking foxholes.

The Marine nodded toward the main gate guard. "Recon Alpha reporting." The guard looked at Shay and Zimivee with hard eyes.

"I don't like this." The guard muttered softly to the scout, with a hint of detest. "This feels like a trap. Those split lips have led the fight against us for the last 30 years, and we're supposed to simply say 'all's forgiven'?"

"I doubt anyone will smile at the party, Chris." The scout team leader softly replied to the guard. "But at the same time, we can't fight both sides of the Covenant split. I'm sure we just need to get some info out of them. Open up the gate so we can get this over with."

The guard finally opened the gate and looked back at the Recon Marine. "Hey, Doug, keep an eye on them." He cast Zimivee an unappreciative look, even though he had no more words for them, and watched him with it as the Elite passed the gate.

"Don't worry." Doug, the scout team leader, looked back past Shay and Zimivee as they followed him into the building. The gate lowered behind them with a soft grinding noise, sealing them off from the outside before they descended a small ramp leading to a lower level of the building. At the base of the ramp was a heavily armored door guarded with turret gunners on either side. At the signal and verification from the Marine, they opened the door. Parting in its center and vanishing behind the wall to the sides, the room beyond opened up as if a whole other world. Beyond lay a swarming facility of human Marines and civilian workers, attending business and maintenance as needed on the plethora of vehicles strewn across the place. Crates and canisters littered the broad room's floor, cans and buckets filled with tools resting near the Humans working on repairs. The noise was incredible, but as the trio made their way past it all, this hum slowly faded, all eyes turning to see them pass.

Zimivee ran his eyes over a Human tank, a blocky thing with much of it's mass centered low in a rectangular block of body and treads beneath the main cannon, which was perched like some water-carved rock on the top. Human architecture had always baffled him, but he knew it was the first time he had seen one of them this close. There had been archived images, in the Covenant database, but he had never thought he'd get so near to almost touch it without knowing it posed him a threat. Such a weapon could scatter his remains over several hundred meters if hit with a round from the main cannon.

His attention left the scorpion when he began to feel the eyes on him, all the Humans gone silent so the slightest noise now echoed like the interior of some old tomb. The looks most of them were giving him made his skin crawl, but it didn't take much to make himself look away. He hadn't any habit of killing them, which might aid him sometime in the future, he mused, if it came to that. But he

didn't like their company any more than they did his. They all seemed to be gazing in a quiet broth of stewing protest.

From another Human in camouflaged clothing a shout caused them all to turn their attentions from the newly arrived aliens as he strutted across the floor. "Back to work!" The loathing crowd quickly returned to the chores. "Corporal Tyrone. Black Company. Our Sergeant was killed two days ago, so I'm in charge." He walked up to Doug, Zimivee and Shay. He was calm, not showing any sign or concern about their presence. "Are you with the Arbiter's group? They passed by nearly two days ago, but we couldn't make contact with them."

Interested suddenly in the new Human, Zimivee gave him a curious look. "I have never met the Arbiter. I am not looking for him, either."

Corporal Tyrone looked at Doug and folded his arms curiously at Zimivee's words. "You're in the alliance but you've never met the Arbi..." Tyrone paused. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" His tone was stern and Doug stepped away from Zimivee. There was a sense of conflict, but Doug never raised his weapon. He stood at Corporal Tyrone's side and watched the Elite and Grunt closely. Tyrone added, "At ease, Private. I don't think we're in any danger from these two. Judging by the size of the wounds in his chest, the brutes don't like him either." Tyrone, clearly a stern leadership type, turned his attention back to Zimivee and Shay. "I'm still waiting on an answer."

"What would you have me say?" Zimivee answered, plainly. He looked briefly at the Marine that had led him in, before centering his gaze on the Corporal. "I owe fealty to no alliance- there is nothing of the kind in Sector five. I came here looking for it, however, because I am hunted by the Brutes for being a part of it. I recognized that I could not hold against them alone, so I left the Radiant to preserve her and what crew remained her."

"You explain yourself to Humans?" Shay muttered, disbelieving. He had not known Elites to explain their actions to one another- yet here stood one telling the former enemy the hows and whys of his actions. "You curious creature."

Zimivee didn't respond to the Grunt's comment. "If my separation from the Arbiter gives you pause, know this at least- I am not here to cause trouble nor to aid the Brutes in any way by killing Humans. I am here for the sole reason of self preservation- I mean to find the ones called the Mirratord."

Tyrone rolled his head askew as he pondered the name 'Mirratord', it wasn't the first time he had heard it. "You talk like you're freelance, or a mercenary, but if you're not with the Brutes, that settles any query I may have. I will say this, however; if you're looking for a group of Elites then you'll most likely need to make contact with Camp Eden. Last reports came back about the African supply territory and it was completely wiped out. The Elites were protecting it while they used it as a base of operations. We lost contact with the supply territory nearly two weeks ago. The Elites fled north to that base." Tyrone thought for a moment, but continued talking.

"No need in hurrying, to meet them." Tyrone looked to Doug, and then

back to Zimivee. "We have basic rations and plenty of water and medical aid. The Private here will take you to a bunk were you can rest, if you like. I'll assign a guard detail to make sure none of my men decide to vent any frustrations. I'll ask around about your Mirrator... one of the men worked at the supply territory before it was nuked." Tyrone quickly walked away, not giving Zimivee much time to speak.

Doug looked up at Zimivee and shrugged. "The Corporal can be rather long winded at times."

Zimivee looked at the Marine, quietly, as if in reflection. "It would seem," He mentioned, his tone soft, "that I am little more than a prisoner here."

"Basically." Doug agreed. He motioned for the duo to follow. "But don't look at that way. If anything, look at it as if you're a high ranking guest." Doug snickered to himself.

He received an unpleasant look from the Sangheili, but Zimivee said nothing as he followed the Marine. Shay kept the Elite between himself and Doug, though, unwilling to get close enough to get knifed. In his eye, Humans were as much trustworthy as Grunts were in the Human's opinions.

It wasn't obvious why Zimivee seemed to be more or less complacent to whatever they saw fit to do with him, but it was obvious that he wasn't pleased with it.

They crossed the small expanse of a nearby garage and entered a separate group of rooms. Inside were several cots and a few clusters of storage boxes.

Doug waved Shay and Zimivee inside. "Here's your spot. Not much, but the squad that stayed here... they got wiped out by the Brutes a few days ago." Doug pulled off his helmet and brushed the sweat from his brow. "If you need anything let the guard outside know." Doug motioned for the door.

Zimivee watched as Shay waddled through the door to inspect the crates, curious what was in them, but he stood where he was, facing the interior from outside. He had no love of tight quarters, and especially despised the idea of becoming trapped inside a hostile Human fortress. Surrounded, he never felt more alone.

After a time, he looked at the Marine. "Where will you be?"

Doug looked at the Elite from across the tiny room. "I'll go and get you some water and a med kit so you can work on the bleeding wound on your chest." Doug turned but paused, "What do you guys eat?"

Zimivee studied him for a short time. "Carbon-based proteins. Why?"

"I was just curious. Figured you may be hungry." Doug walked out of the room leaving a last word, "I'll see what I can find." With that he vanished from the door, leaving Shay and Zimivee to their own devices.

Zimivee watched him go, then looked down, at Shay. The Grunt looked

back, having completed his cursory inspection of the quarter and had been holding position for a short while as Zimivee and Doug had conversed. He cocked his head, curious, but Zimivee only shook his, and paced deeper into the small chamber to look for himself at what was there. With one thumb hooked under his belt, those fingers tapping a rhythm against one of the swords, Zimivee tried to think of ways to keep from becoming a prisoner while the Humans decided what to do with him. Briefly he wondered why he had accompanied the one this deep into their fortress without first having secured negotiation status. For all he knew, the Corporal he'd seen might just forget he was even there and he'd spend the rest of his life just looking for a way out that didn't involve dying. The nature and duration of their hospitality was really yet to be seen.

Outside the room, Doug was greeted by Corporal Tyrone. "Are they in there?"

"Yes sir, I'm looking for something for them to eat. I'm sure any old meat will do." Doug sighed.

"Delay that for now, we have other problems to worry about." Tyrone pulled a cigar from his pocket in placed it to his lips, though he chose not to light it. "I just spoke with one of those pilots from the Elite's supply zone. Those Elite Mirratord are pretty tough, and pride themselves on honor. They're trust worthy, but... this guy." Tyrone rubbed his head. "He isn't one of them."

Doug looked back at the room. "Well, he never said he was. Just that he was looking for them."

Tyrone added. "He said he was a merc, he works alone, and he's got a pet grunt that isn't happy with being here. I don't like it. He might be attempting to gain intel for the Brutes. We can't risk it."

Doug looked at the Corporal sternly. "Sir?"

"If he was with the Arbiter, I'd be fine with this, but he said he wasn't... and he's looking for the Mirratord. The Mirratord don't sound like the type that will welcome a merc." Tyrone wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. "Get him out of here. Now! He's not staying. I don't like it... it feels weird."

Doug could see it in Tyrone's eyes, the pressure of command was making him crack. "I'll dig up some rations and take them west." He didn't want to argue.

"No, you point them south and get back to your post. Those brutes are out there and we don't have any backup coming. We are all alone."

"South?" Doug questioned. "There's nothing down there but open space and brute patrols. He'll be walking into... enemy... hands... I see." Doug thought for a second, thought about what he would feel like if he stumbled into an Elite camp and this happened to him. Doug wanted to fight and defend his home. Sure, the Elites lead the forces against humanity for nearly thirty years, but that hatred had to stop if the universe was going to survive. Men like Tyrone merely wanted to live, and be safe, and didn't care about what was happening outside. "I'll take care of it, sir."

"See that you do, and get back to your post." Tyrone exhaled deeply, almost relieved that he no longer had to worry about another problem, and then walked away.

Doug turned and walked toward the supply racks. He didn't know what to do, but he wasn't going to let a more powerful ally be sent out into enemy hands. He packed ammo, as much as he could carry, a duffel bag of rations and spare AR and BR rifles, and a set of SMGs.

"You gearing up for a one man war?" laughed a nearby Marine. Doug turned nervously and sighed at Steve, another private in his detail.

"Do me a favor, Steve. I have orders to... take the Elite out of here. I need a 'hog."

7. The Gift Of Amity

**7: The Gift Of Amity **

November 9, 2552 Sol Relative Time

Southeast Africa, Earth

Quietly, but with much needed haste, Doug loaded his gear into a stripped down hog; a discarded parts machine that was still running but wouldn't be missed. The hog had seen its fair share of battles, but it was still road worthy. He tossed what ammo and weapons he could into the back. With the turret removed there was ample seating for four, though the hog was only a two-seater.

Doug climbed into the drivers seat and checked the gauges. The speedometer was gone, no problem, steering wheel was off center, he could adjust to that, but the clutch felt soft... too soft. He pushed it hard to the floor, and cranked the engine. It started with a smooth hum, backfired and then died.

"Yeah, this'll go well." He gave the hog a little gas, pressed the clutch and pressed the starter button. She hummed to life and started to purr. "That a girl." With the engine started he switched on the transmission controls and shifted into reverse, then backed it out of the used parts area of the bunker. He slowly navigated through the crowd of civilian workers and Marines, smiling at them as he went. Some questioned why he was taking that hog, but quickly went back to work. Doug then pulled up to the main vehicle ramp. The gate was closed and Steve walked toward it questioningly.

"You sure about this?" Steve looked curious at this act, eyeing the war-torn hog with a quizzical stare. "I mean, if this is a mission from Tyrone, why don't you take a fully repaired hog?"

"I told you," Doug said, "Something that won't be missed if the Brutes show up." He sighed as his eyes nervously paced behind him. "I'll get the Elite, you stay here." Doug quickly raced toward Shay and Zimivee's 'quarters' and thought as he went. Was this really the best course he could think of? He was risking his neck for an alien, and an alien he didn't like and had most likely assisted in the destruction of countless human worlds. He knew nothing about the creature, only that if it got angry it could easily kill him. Doug

paused for a moment as he gripped the door to the room, and he realized that the Elite didn't seem as powerful as he had been told- in fact, he seemed short. The door opened with a rustic moan, startling Shay. "I hope you guys didn't unpack. "

Shay squeaked in response, then settled, staring at him with what looked like puzzlement. "What that mean?"

In the middle of the floor of the room, Zimivee sat on his heels, watching the exchange without comment. After a moment, he rose, and addressed Doug. "I know." He said, calmly. "You had your converse directly outside this door."

Doug looked over his shoulder, eying the location where Tyrone had questioned him. He turned to Zimivee, "Fine, then you know my CO is a bit jumpy. He has good intentions, but he's wrong on this. I have a vehicle, we're leaving."

Zimivee only nodded compliance. "Lead."

Doug turned and motioned toward the gate and the running hog. Zimivee and

Shay followed, one contemplating the following actions of the Human after a conversation like that, the other considering the odds of their being led out for a quiet execution. Steve, watching as they approached, gave the signal for the gate controller to part the door. With a metallic grind the doors pulled apart, but the sound echoed across the base and Doug quickened his pace- Tyrone would hear the gate opening and come question him, so he had to leave before that happened.

Doug mounted into the drivers seat as Zimivee and Shay hopped in back. While Zimivee was able to mount the vehicle with ease, he had to reach back and pull the Grunt up by the top of his methane tank when he failed to get much farther than half-off the bumper. Steve climbed in the passengers seat and looked at Doug. They shared a short glare, Doug obviously confused as to why Steve was tagging along, but he didn't question it, as there was no time. The door opened wide enough and Doug accelerated out. His side-rear mirror showed the angry Corporal running toward them, but he gave up the chase as they climbed the hill and sped out of the base.

The hog quickly accelerated along the monitored road leading out of town, the only escape route the team had in case they were attacked, so for now all was quiet.

Doug leaned his head back and yelled above the loud roar of the engine, "You two have names?"

Settling next to the rollbar, Zimivee dipped his head. "What?" Behind him, Shay was watching the ground zip past like he was going to become motion sick, but the Grunt made no comment to that end or otherwise.

Doug turned his head askew, but kept his eyes on the road, "Names? What can we call you?" A chance of small talk. Steve, sitting in the passenger seat, tilted his helmet forward, over his eyes, and attempted to take a nap.

"I am Hoku Zimivee. The Unggoy is called Shay." Zimivee answered. "I noted the other Humans call you Doug?"

Doug turned forward fully and nodded in response. "Yeah. This sleeping soldier at my side is Steve."

Steve gave a thumbs-up, signaling that he wasn't asleep and said, "But don't get comfortable with it. I'd just as much prefer you simply called me Private." Steve's voice was full of animosity.

Doug elbowed the man. "Give 'em a break, man. He doesn't want to be here any more than you do." Doug reached back and grabbed a bag of rations. "Dig in there and see if there's anything you like. We're a long ways from Eden."

Zimivee looked at the indicated bag, then took it and began to try to make it come open. Doug took a quick look over his shoulder as the Elite struggled slightly with the latch on the satchel, as most Human military satchels were designed not to come open easily so the soldier carrying it didn't need to stop and gather his fallen things every so often. He chuckled a bit, but returned his focus to the road. "There's food, and water in there. There's another bag behind you with some medical supplies..." Doug eyes widened as he stared ahead, before he slammed on the brakes and steered the 'hog off the road, startling the passengers and wakening Steve.

Steve planted his foot on the doorsill, to keep from tumbling out, and Shay seized the sidewall as he let out a spooked squeak signature of his kind. Zimivee let the bag rest between his hooves, looking up and ahead past the Humans in the front to see what had caused the commotion. As much as he knew it was possible, he also understood he was in no condition to be thrust into another fight- his collection of injuries were making it hard beyond measure to keep a straight face. The last thing he needed to do was show weakness in the presence of potential enemies. Even if those aforementioned had offered no such threat. The injury in his chest was causing his breath to shorten, worst of all.

Doug turned the hog around and hopped out. "Brute patrol ahead." He checked to make sure the hog was out of sight, covered by the treetops on the side of the road, and looked in his binoculars as he edged out of the brush. Steve sighed heavily and kicked the hog in frustration. He then looked at the Elite and the wound on his chest. With heavy huff he gripped the bag and pulled out a medical kit of biofoam and a few healing agents.

He showed the contents of his hands to Zimivee and said, "You know how to use this? It's biofoam, it'll keep you from bleeding out and stabilize any internal injuries long enough for you to get some real help."

Zimivee cocked his head at the items, then looked at Steve. "I am unfamiliar with Human equipment, Private. Regardless what it is."

Shay dropped over the side of the 'hog, and tottered around it once before skipping off into the bushes in the direction of the patrol. The action got Zimivee's attention, but all he did was slip from the back of the vehicle himself.

Steve hopped out of the hog and stood with Zimivee. He placed the biofoam in the Elite's hand and showed him how to use it. "When you do it, it'll hurt like nothing you've felt." Steve then left the Elite to his devices and slowly moved to the side of the road with Shay and Doug.

Doug peered into the distance. "They didn't see us. But it looks like a big party is going on. No way we can clear them. I count two phantoms and a ground patrol."

"What you big plan now? Why you pick this road if you no think it go nowhere useful?" Shay asked.

Shortly, Zimivee appeared behind them, his mandibles clenched. He didn't say anything, but he looked past them at the enemy before looking over at the two Humans and the one Grunt.

Doug sighed at Shay's comment, "It was the only clear road out of here." Doug looked back at the group and said, "We can try to wait them out, but it might be part of the same group that is trying to find our base. So they may not leave. They aren't coming toward us, but they sure as hell aren't leaving." Doug looked at Zimivee as the elite glared at him. "You... okay?"

"I will live." He answered, simply. "How many are there?"

"You go crazy! You insane you think we fight that mess!" Shay exclaimed. "Too many, that how many. Too many."

Steve knelt into a bush and glared down the road. "I agree with the little fella. By the way they've dispersed, there's no going around them. We should head back and check with Tyrone."

Doug pulled down his binoculars. He agreed about the Brute's ranks, going around and fighting through would be insane, but going back to base might not be such a good idea. Steve turned and made his way back to the hog, double-checking his ammo for his BR. Doug sat and thought, but realized with protest that they couldn't go forward, so they had to go back. They needed to take another route.

"Damn." Doug cursed softly as he turned back to the hog.

Without comment, Zimivee watched them go, as if uncaring that the situation had just evolved yet again. His expression changed, suddenly, making Doug wonder if he were not being sized up for a kill. The Marine felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, as his senses screamed at him to duck or lunge or spin to the side, something other than standing where he was now.

Before he could begin to, though, it was too late, and the shadow of a Brute three times his size welled up behind him, swallowing his own in the pale moonlight. The Brute closed a hand around Doug's head, and lifted him, throwing him like he weighed nothing, through the air towards the road.

Zimivee's arm shot out, seizing him by sinking his claws through his Kevlar vest, and pulled him back to the ground. He'd just been spared the painful landing his flight would have afforded him, but sparing enough time to catch the Human had robbed Zimivee of all time to move from where he stood. Formerly missed in the poor light, his motions

had betrayed his presence and the Brute had primed and thrown a grenade to follow the Human's trajectory to the Elite that had caught him.

Turning his back on the Brute, Zimivee wrapped his arms around Doug, thereby enveloping him inside his personal shield emitter. The grenade detonated just as he finished the move, and though it completely cracked Zimivee's shields, neither he nor Doug had been so much as scathed. With the passing of the brilliant flare of light the explosive had made, Doug was still seeing spots when he felt the warrior attach something to his web gear before pushing him away.

When his vision cleared, he could neither see Zimivee nor himself, and he suddenly realized that that extra device he'd been gifted with had been the Elite's secondary camouflage engine. Brutes were swarming past the 'hog he had been in just moments before, blinking out the spots in their own eyes, and searching for the bodies they were sure should be lying nearby somewhere. Doug had no idea where Zimivee had gone, and if he called he would betray his own custom hiding-place, right there in plain sight. Steve, to his credit, had somehow gotten close enough to the 'hog before the grenade had detonated, putting a good deal of distance between himself and the grenade, sparing him a lot of damage. Still, he had perforations all down the side of one leg and an open wound on the same arm, but as long as he stayed where he was the odds of him getting missed were good. One by one the Brutes made their way, until Doug could count them all. All ten of them passed him up, nary a Grunt or Jackal to be seen among them. Dispersed, they began to scour the area again.

He could tell they were attempting to sniff him out, but had yet to realize why they didn't see his lifeless carcass lying somewhere mangled in the dirt at their feet. Right when one was about to try to walk through the Marine, a small commotion- that of one of their number piling in the dust like he were dead- turned their attentions.

Zimivee had struck, and even as the remaining Brutes began to fire wildly in an attempt to find the Elite by lighting off his shields, razor sharp blades of light twirled through the air and reduced two more to component limbs and parts. Doug quickly saw something wasn't going quite as well as it could have; seeing their fellows shedding pieces of their anatomies, the rest of the Brute's squadron laid into their dying fellows even before they had a chance to fall, attempting to catch the warrior attacking them in the act.

Shields crackled into view, flaring briefly, and failed. Restored to view, Zimivee doubled over, and dropped to a knee. Even in the dark, Doug could tell the alien was sputtering blood.

Doug crawled, on his hands and knees to the hog, and grabbed an Assault Rifle. Panic still filled him, more shock than anything. His life was spared thanks to the Elite-Sangheili, or whatever they liked to be called. Doug only knew that he had to return the favor. Zimivee needed cover, if only a little. He leveled his weapon and fired. Doug's nerves were still tingling from the earlier moment; but he fired. He'd barely escaped death's door; so he fired. Had it not been for Zimivee Doug knew he would have been dead; and kept on firing until one of the Brutes were dead.

Shay leapt at Steve, either attempting to crawl under after him or drag him out of hiding, but Steve didn't know which until he heard the loud ping of the Grunt's methane tank smacking the sidewall of the warthog. He was too thick to slip under- sinking little claws into Steve's wounded arm, Shay yanked him out from under the 'hog and dragged him stumbling to his feet and away barely seconds before a Brute lifted the side and tipped the vehicle over until it sat perched that way. Seeing there was nothing under it, the Brute walked on, rounding the front as Shay dragged Steve around the back bumper, avoiding the enemy's sightlines. Shay lit off with his plasma pistol, but even as Steve added his own beat to the pounding gunfire cacophony happening around them, two more of the seven remaining rounded the 'hog as another sought to tip it back onto it's wheels, right on top of Shay and Steve. Shay had just tossed his first grenade and watched it fuse into the second Brute's collarbones when the 'hog let go a terrible groan of body metal, and promptly landed on them.

Shay flattened hard and fast, the point of his tank digging into the undercarriage of the 'hog he was now more or less under. Caught and stuck, he had only his armor and the attachment design of the tank between his body and the crushing weight of the vehicle. Shay was going to go nowhere, and tipped up and hung on the Grunt, neither was the 'hog. Steve, while knocked flat, and partly under a tire, came to realize that the Grunt had spared him his own fate. The width and height of his tank was greater than the 'hog's clearance, and despite having his good arm under a tire, said tire wasn't touching the ground and his injuries were minor, at best- but his head had been hit hard enough to make him dizzy, as well as having no idea what had happened to the gun he'd been holding a moment before.

At the end of the last Brute, there was nothing left between Doug and the night save the tentative calls of native insects. But despite all things he had seen, a revelation had presented itself, and he stood there in the dark alive and in one piece because he'd been caught, by the one creature he had deemed to disregard and despise just a few hours earlier. Fading back into view as the camouflage engine auto shutoff, Doug motioned toward Zimivee, listening for the faint sound of life. A breath, faint but there. He turned to see Shay's reflective armor shimmering with motion. A good sign, but a bad moment. He had to go back to the base. Zimivee was in bad shape and Shay was no worse for the wear.

"Steve, can you walk?" Doug gave a soft whisper. Any louder and he feared another Brute patrol showing up.

"Walk? Yes. Anything else is a matter of opinion." Steve grunted at the pain in his arm.

"Check on the little fellow." Doug added, ignoring Steve's comment. Doug leaned to Zimivee. "How you doing, big guy?"

The beaten Elite turned his head, tipping it to see Doug. Pale, half-guised moonlight reflected on his dark eyes, glittering like stars for their moisture. He sputtered something first, before rasping, "Not as well as I would enjoy." He sounded as though he had either ruptured a lung or had breathed some of the blood from his other injuries. But the mere action of drawing a deep enough breath to speak cost him several minutes of harsh coughing, as his battered body attempted to void the foreign material.

Doug sat back, stunned at the sight. What was keeping Zimivee alive now was a complete mystery to him, but he was not going to let the Elite die right in front of him. "Steve, we need to get Zimivee out of here, ASAP!"

Steve staggered to his feet and grabbed Shay by the arm. He gave a sold tug to free the Grunt from being buried under the hog, but Shay didn't move and Steve cringed as his other arm began to ache again. "He isn't moving, and I can't lift the hog. He's alive, thoughâ€¦|barely." Steve slide down the side of the hog, pain swelling in his arm as he fought the urge to scream. Doug cursed under his breath. He raced back to the hog, grabbed a med kit and ran back to Zimivee. But he simply held it curiously, "I don't know what to do." He moaned with the kit in hand. In desperation Doug tripped on his radio, set for friendly frequencies, and said, "This is Private Doug Jackson. My squad got hit... four miles south of ... damn, I don't know where the hell... somebody home in on my signal." It was risky, the Covenant could be sniffing the line and come right back to him, but they needed the aid. Zimivee was dieing, Shay was trapped and in danger of being crushed, and Steve was on the edge of blacking out from the pain._"This is FFA-01 Tangent on approach vector to Mombasa, Private."_ A woman's voice barked in his ear._"Your signal is close but you must be in the brush. How many in your squad?"_

Steve nearly teared up. "Four ma'am. Three wounded."

_ "Pop smoke and we'll pick you up."_ The sound of a Pelican hummed overhead.

"Be advised, I see three Phantoms in the distance." Doug crawled back to the hog, grabbed a can of smoke and tossed it. A pink-red mist filled the air. "Steve, stay with Shay and stay conscious! I'm going to get help."

Steve shot back, "Yeah, good idea." Pain was clearly displayed across his face.

Doug stopped at Zimivee, "Help is coming."

Zimivee stared at him, silent- his breathing had steadied, though it was still shallow and liquid, but even though he didn't say a word, Doug got the impression the Elite was smiling at him. It was as close to a thanks as he could get at the moment.

Shay, though, was still more concerned with his current predicament, and kept scrabbling at the dirt, trying to wrest free of his impossible position. With the point of his tank up inside the undercarriage of the 'hog, he wouldn't make any headway until the vehicle was lifted. Being so squashed, he was beginning to have trouble breathing, too, but for lack of space to do so in rather than from any injury. Pausing to catch his breath, the Grunt heaved a sigh, and muttered, "I didn't think I'd die like this." As if he thought the notion of being crushed under an inanimate object rather ridiculous.

The Pelican roared overhead and a tether dropped to through the tree tops. Two ODSST slid fast down the rope and took aim around the area. One of the men shouted out, "Clear!" while the other seemed to be talking inside his helmet. He then approached Doug.

"Senior Chief Raynord, Black Ops." The man stated through his helmet com. The man walked close to Zimivee and looked at him closely. The chief stood and turned to Doug, "The Elite is severely wounded. We can't risk moving him yet until his wounds are bound."

The Chief then turned to the other ODS'T figure and motioned for him to walk toward the hog. "Get the grunt and Marine."

The two men were wearing all Black ODS'T modified armor. And as the other man approached Steve he gave him a quick glimpse and then shouldered his rifle. He gave Steve a shoulder, moved him away from the Hog and then leaned into the warthog's side.

"Get ready to crawl out." The man said. He then grunted as he leaned into the sidewall, and tilted the hog enough for Shay to crawl free. Steve sat in shock seeing a Marine lift the heavy vehicle but clearly the "Black Ops" was straining to hold it.

Shay wasted no time, though, eager to be free of his predicament. Once out, he hopped to his feet, and slapped all the grit from the cracks in his armor. Looking around, he spied and retrieved his plasma pistol, but it found its place back on his equipment belt. "Me okay." He told the newcomers. "Who you be?"

"Call me 08." The man said as he dropped the bulk of the unusable warthog. "Foxtrot, land on the road so we can get some aid." The man known as 08 turned to Shay as the pelican overhead began to slowly drift back toward the road. "Give me a hand with this guy."

Shay hopped over, and took a hold of Steve again, this time using his grasp not to drag him around the 'hog but towards the road where the Pelican was holding position. The sooner they were gone from here, the happier he would be regardless of how many Humans there were. Together, the trio moved toward the landing Pelican to help Steve's injury.

Chief Raynord opened his COM as he gave Zimivee another look. "Gridolee, you may want to get down here. I'll keep watch until you arrive."

"Understood honorable human." Chief Raynord's radio echoed.

Another voice cut into the line. "Chief, those Phantoms are starting to slowly drift our way." The pelican pilot added.

Chief Raynord looked about the field and counted the dead brutes. "A battle happened here and we just missed it. They might be attempting to communicate with the patrol they just lost." Chief turned to Doug. "How far is your base?"

Doug, still stunned by the last events, thought hard. "Uh..." He shook the cobwebs from his head and looked up at the man before him. "Ten miles, back up the road, chief."

Chief Raynord radioed the pelican. "Copy that?"

The pilot replied. "Yes sir, I got it. A dusty shab of a hole, but there is a patrol unit based there. We can lay low for a few hours if need be."

Chief Raynord switched channels. "Tangent, return ten-kilo vector, check altitude and dust off on the edge of the town. Will rendezvous when friendly's are green."

A second pilot replied on the line. "Roger that, Chief. We'll stay on station until you arrive."

Doug was listening in on the COM Channel. "Sir, thank god you arrived. I don't think we could have made it."

"We aren't clear yet, private." Chief Raynord pulled his Assault Rifle taught to his shoulder and glared into the distance. "We picked up your signal en route to Mombasa. I almost gave the order to pass you by."

Doug froze. "Sir, why?"

Raynord looked at the young man. "I have the creator of the Spartan Program on my second Pelican and we are on our way to meet with ONI. Sorry kid, but her life is far more important then yours or mine." Doug looked down at the injured Elite. "Or his."

8. Alien Honor

**8: Alien Honor **

**November 10, 2552 Sol Relative Time **

Southeast Africa, Earth

A rustle in the bushes caught Doug's attention, and he swung his rifle, but before he could take aim Chief Raynord had already gripped the barrel and angled it down. Doug was astonished by his speed, and at the fact that he couldn't pull the weapon free from his grip.

"Stay calm, he's with me." Chief Raynord said as they watched a massive Elite in black armor enter the area. Upon the Elite's upper chest were three parallel bars of purple light. A Mirratord officer. "Gridolee... he has twin blades." Chief Raynord stated, turning to face the wounded Zimivee.

"And he is nearly dead." Gridolee answered as he knelt beside Zimivee. "But alive enough to fight on." Gridolee examined Zimivee's wounds, not commenting on the fact that he was wearing Mirratord single blades. As if reacting to Gridolee's sudden arrival, though, Zimivee opened his eyes again, and looked up at him.

A puzzled expression crossed his features for a moment, and his mandibles parted in a hoarse rasp; "â€| MÃ¼n?"

Gridolee froze for a moment, reflecting on the name. "You have me mistaken for another. More so, how do you know that name?" Gridolee leaned toward the wound in Zimivee's chest, seeing that the wound needed to be closed.

Zimivee shook his head, noncomprehending- he was awake, but not precisely coherent. "Your timing is the worstâ€| where have you been

hiding, old man?"

Indeed he did know MÃ¼n, Gridolee thought to himself. Gridolee knew MÃ¼n by name only, a warrior of the Mirrator'd that had died in combat some months ago. Gridolee aided Zimivee to his back and began to work on the wound with a heated syringe and a small medical device that would assist in healing the internal wounds. He was thankful the humans had such a device, but naturally the pain would be tremendous. He would have to induce sleep in order to give the injured Zimivee a field treatment. "What is your name, young one?" Gridolee knew that the warrior would be partially unconscious before he could fully answer.

Zimivee blinked at him, his eyes glazed. "â€| Hoku." It was obvious he no longer knew where he was, but he seemed to be responding to something that had happened long ago. Someone had asked him that before, when circumstances were different. "Justâ€| Hoku." It wouldn't be long before he faded out completely.

Chief Raynord approached from cover. His all black ODST modified armor cloaking him in the shadows of the thick treeline. "Is he alright?"

"He will live." Gridolee replied as he began to seal the wound.

"We need to move." Chief Raynord looked over his shoulder, toward the red marker he had placed on his HUD, as the Brute patrol began to slowly approach. "How much time do you need?"

"His internal injuries are stable, but his structure is ... unique." Gridolee paused for a moment. "I will need more time."

"You don't have it." Chief Raynord turned on his radio. "Med EVAC, now. Get a stretcher here." He turned back to Gridolee. "Close him up and we can work on him at the base."

Gridolee nodded stiffly as he realized the Chief was right. The familiar hum of reverse gravity generators was already sounding in the distance. Two Marines trotted into the area with a stretcher, and began to lift Zimivee's unconscious form to the Pelican nearby. Raynord stood and ran toward Doug, Steve and the little Grunt, Shay.

"Private."

"Sir." Doug nodded. "They hit us as we were..." Doug hadn't really thought about how he would explain his decision to a superior. "â€|moving to meet up with other Elite forces."

Chief Raynord looked at the young Private and shook his head. "You can explain later. Is he mobile enough to make it to the Pelican?" He motioned at Steve.

Doug turned to see the indicated. Steve gave a loose thumbs up, and soft moan with the gesture. "He's in pain, but mobile." Doug answered.

"Hit him with morphine and carry him to the ship." Chief Raynord then turned to Shay. "For now, you fall in with my Grunt patrols."

Shay gave him a curious glare, and made an obscure noise behind his mask, before looking at Steve. "What be morphine?" Looking back at the Chief, he added, "And why you Elite colored funny?"

Chief Raynord stood and adjusted his assault rifle. "Migpap, get out here and get him in line. We have to move." From the brush appeared a pack of four grunts in black armor.

The lead grunt approached and sniffed Shay. "Me Migpap. Me pack elder, you fall in and go to honorable human ship. We leave before brutes come."

Shay stared at them with wide eyes for a long moment before ducking his head and falling in- if there was one thing he wasn't, it was a pack leader.

Migpap lead the group to the ramp as Doug aided Steve up it. In the center of the Pelican's bay lay Zimivee's unconscious form, while the Marines strapped him in. It would be a quick trip to the base, but Doug was already torn about how he would explain to Corporal Tyrone why he was with the Elite when they were attacked. Shay waddled up the ramp at the rear of the group of Grunts and Doug watched him annoyingly follow the pack. It was clear that Shay wasn't happy about this set up.

Steve, drugged up from Morphine, smiled at Doug as he gingerly sat on the bench with a medic. "That little fella saved my life back there... yup. I owe him one." Steve slurred.

"Yeah, mate." Doug said. "Zimivee saved me as well." Doug sat down and exhaled heavily as the events of the last hour sunk in.

"You feel it, don't you? I have hurt you, and now you feel the depth of your error in allowing my strike to hit you. There is more to this lesson than merely not allowing my strikes to land, Hoku. You must understand how to handle your pain. A true enemy would not give pause if you collapse. He would kill you, honorably or not. This is the way of war. Do you understand what I am saying?"

_Shaking, the battered youth nodded. _

"_Look at me, and speak your answers, Hoku."_

His features pinched, but he tried his best to straighten his posture. It didn't work. Defeated, Hoku sagged to the floor of the sparring arena. "I cannot."

His mentor stepped forward, and lifted his head so their gazes met. "Hoku, I cannot teach you if you do not learn. Your injuries are neither fatal nor crippling, and yet you sit on the floor without regard to what I am telling you."

"_Pain is not a conjuring of the mind, Master." Hoku replied, hoarse. "It is a synapse firing messages of damages through the nerves to the brain. It is for the purpose of self-preservation, all so the afflicted creature does not damage itself further needlessly."_

"_I understand the means by which pain happens, young one." He laughed, lightly, a little amused by the retort. "But you fail to grasp my point. I neither said to disregard your pain nor that it was just a mindset. Indeed it is pain that is used to break minds, when enemies take prisoners for the sake of information. I want you to realize that your pain is not a greater thing than you are. I want you to see that this sensation you feel now in light of the damage rendered doesn't have to be more damaging than it already is. The pain stopped you from fighting me, didn't it?"_

Hoku paused, to consider. "Yesâ€¦|"

"_And you opened death's door by disregarding your opponent, who, I might add, did not suffer the same distraction."_

Hoku sighed. "Yes."

"_Do you see, then? Finally?"_

"_No, I think I only have a vague idea of the general concept of which you speak." Hoku offered. "I know I am weak, Master, and that is why you are the one teaching me, but not what the concept of the reactions to pain has to do with this."_

His mentor slapped him upside the head. "You are not weak!! You are fragile, but you are not weak. You could be so much more, but you just won't see it."

"_Won't!" Hoku wailed, clutching now at his head also. "Master, I _can't!_ I don't know where to look and you aren't pointing!"_

He sighed, exasperated. "Hoku, you don't understand what I am attempting to teach you because you don't believe in yourself. I took you under my wing because I believed in you. I believed I could make something of you, something more than what you are now."

Suffering, Hoku squinted up at his mentor. "What does belief have to do with it?"

"_Belief has everything to do with it, child! You will never see what is right before your very eyes until you believe you have the capability to open them!"_

"_I believe I could do better, Master, I just can't seem to accomplish it." Hoku said, simply. "I know why I am not beaten into a shape like the other children, and I understand why I'm here, why you are teaching me yourself. But everyday you take me in here and drill these ideas into my head and the motions we go throughâ€¦| and everyday I fail miserably! Don't you see? I don't like this circle I am stuck in. I want out. I want to do better, I want to grow past this. I want to learn it, I want to do something more!" He shoved his battered body from the floor, and staggered to his small hooves. "I hate being fragile! I want to be like the other children, Master, and I can't be. I can only manage the weakest effort and try to make it do."_

His mentor crossed his arms, watching him pick himself up. "Hoku, this isn't about who was born as what. You will be whatever you make of yourself. No more, no less. End of discussion."

"_No!" Hoku protested, clawing the fighting staff from the floor where he had dropped it. "No, this is not the end of the discussion!" His feeble attempt to hit his mentor with it was parried without the elder Sangheili even needing to take his own staff in both hands. The fact frustrated him, and he swung again, this time being threaded to the other side, harmless, but in a fashion to make him over extend if he wasn't prepared. Hoku withdrew, and cracked the staff across his mentor's with a little more force, but the amount of effort it took made his shoulders hurt._

_A frustrated, pained cry escaped him, aware what he was doing to himself. He had only just outgrown the stage where a touch that was too firm would break his skin, but his musculature was still bonded poorly and overexertion caused them to tear. _

"_This discussion isn't over until you explain to me what you mean, and I understand it!" Hoku stated, forcefully. "You aren't going to decide what happens when anymore! You aren't leaving this building or this room until I learn what I want to know, and that is final!" He slammed his staff down on his mentor's, then swung it over to the side and brought the low end up, catching the adult warrior for the very first time in his life with a solid blow- straight to the mandibles._

He jerked back, and cupped his injury in his hand, a little astounded at the fact that it was there. Stressed, breathing heavy and sure he'd totally ruined his shoulders, Hoku could only stand there and watch, hoping his temper tantrum hadn't earned him any punishment. His fragile body had had just about all it could handle. His mentor met his gaze, then, and past the bloodied mandibles, grinned as if struck with humor. "So you aren't hopeless after all."

"_Iâ€¦ I did not mean toâ€¦" Hoku began, tentative._

He was waved off. "No, thatâ€¦ you adapted, and that was part of what I was actually aiming for." He wiped the blood away, tasting what remained as he closed the gap between them. Hoku held still, watching the floor a few dozen feet in front of him as his mentor walked in a circle around him, examining the stress and damage rendered. "You need to mind your limits, Hoku, you've pushed yourself too far again."

"_I cannot win if I do not try, Master." He answered, simply._

"_You cannot win if you die, either. Remember that." He came back around to his front, and stood there facing him. Resting the butt end of his fighting staff on the floor, he continued. "Hoku, one of the first things the Academy teaches young aspiring Watchmen is that fear has no place in the hearts of true warriors. This is one of the greater flaws in their system. You see, fear has its usesâ€¦ and its place. Don't let it get out of place, but never try to disregard or ignore it. Everything exists for a purpose, and everything can be used for the greater ambitions of any who know how to use their resources. Fear, Hoku, is much akin to pain. Pain is often accompanied by it, because when cut down and crippled, a warrior then can see his death, and no one wants to die a horrible death, young one. Pain, like fear, has its place, but you mustn't let it rule you."_

Hoku nodded. "Yes, Master."

"_When you pulled yourself from the floor, you bottled your pain within rage. You used your anger at me for denying you the lesson to redirect your attention- and while it worked, anger is far too volatile and dangerous for this to become an acceptable practice. You cannot hate all those that oppose you, Hoku." He rested a hand lightly on the youth's shoulder. "Someday, you may yet be called to end a life of one you know personally, one you want with all your hearts to preserve- one you cannot save. This is a necessary evil wrought of living as we do, Hoku, and there are boundaries we dare not cross where that evil stops being necessary and becomes wanton. Do not go that road. Pain, fear, contempt- all have their place, but none of them belong in control. Focus. Your feelings, both physical and emotional, are your own, are a part of you, and you cannot deny them. You control them, Hoku. You and you alone. Do you understand this?"_

"_I- not really, Master. Not all of it. But I follow you so far." Hoku said._

"_Good." He took his hand from Hoku's shoulder and stepped back a pace. "Your arms are a part of you. You control their motions, what they do and when- even why. Similarly, your pain can be controlled. Even if it seeks to drown you, you can still- if you try- keep your head. Feel it, Hoku. You must let yourself feel it. Do not wish for it to cease, because it is a fool's hope for immediate reprieve and we all know as much. Let it flow through you, let it spread and dim- until there is nothing to temper and you again are the master of your own. Pain, fear, hate. Mastery of this is not a battle-calm. Battle is not calm. Nor should you be. But in control is a must."_

"_I understand, Master." Hoku told him. "But it still hurts."_

"_It will." He answered, smiling past his broken lip. Unlike Hoku's, his bones were strong, and he could have taken much more damage than that. Doubtless it only stung a little, whereas such a blow to Hoku's own head would have collapsed his skull and killed him instantly. He felt a twinge of bitterness at the fact, but had long ago learned to accept what was truth and not scorn it- it only complicated his lessons. "In time, the pain of infliction will lessen on it's own, and leave you only with the pain of existence- at which point the impact trauma to your flesh has gone, and the natural healing process has begun. If the injury is not too severe, when it is done healing, you will feel no pain at all. You will, however, have a rather ugly scar to deal with."_

"_Why?"_

"_Because scarring is something the body does when presented with a deep injury it cannot rebuild to the old standard. We all do that, Hoku."_

"_Will that become a scar?" Hoku touched his own mandible in reference to his mentor's._

"_No, young one." He touched it, lightly, and looked at his fingers after. "You only broke the skin."_

"_But you didn't break mine." Hoku protested, his breath still slightly harsh._

"_Not this time, no." He agreed. But your bones have broken, and unless we get them straightened, they won't heal in the correct position."_

"_And the lesson?"_

His mentor laughed. "Consider it learned."

Gridolee leaned closer to the unconscious Zimivee after hearing Doug speak. "So, Hoku Zimivee. One who has no past has come this far. You have some explaining to do, brother." Gridolee examined the wound and noticed that it was healing very well. He then watched as Chief Raynord and Black Ops 08 climbed into the Pelican.

Chief Raynord radioed. "Let's go! Fast as you can." The bird climbed and just as she cleared the tree's canopy a Phantom roared into view. Mathew swung the hitch chain gun into position at the rear and began to fire at the floating Covenant troop carrier. Shells pinged as they were tossed from the chain gun and the full metal casings rattled on the Pelican's deck. The Pelican accelerated as the pilot gave a shout.

"Hang on everybody!" She screamed as the Pelican banked hard and twisted over the tree line. Plasma showered towards the ship as the Phantom gave chase. "You [i _don't_ [/i] want to mess with me today!" She shouted as she inverted one of the Pelican's engines and spun the ship 180 degrees. "Weapons hot!"

The co-pilot shouted. "Safeties off! Fuses lit!"

Four wing-mounted rockets screamed as contrails of smoke made lines toward the pursuing Phantom. The pilot then spun the Pelican once again and sped away as the rockets impacted the Brute's Phantom, shattered its hull, and pulverized it. The Covenant ship nosed and began to hum loudly, but it exploded before it hit the ground.

The pilot gave a shout as she exhaled over the cockpit speaker. "Semper Fi, Marines. We're clear for now."

Eric yelled forward. "ETA?"

"Ten till dust off, Chief. Smoke 'em if you got 'em." Every head nodded and cheered as they made due course to the nearby base.

Migpap sat near Shay and looked at him curiously. "Why you armor ranger colored?"

Shay looked back at him. "Me armor no be mine. Me took it from dead Grunt." He shifted, slightly, and raised his torso so his rather polished chest could be seen from under the green tank he wore. "This be what we both look like after spend time in big sandy area." Shrugging, Shay hunched forward again, eyeing the other occupants of the Pelican warily. "Me no wanted to be big shiny target."

Migpap sat where he stood and nodded as Shay looked around. "Where you serve? You pack follow Brutes or Elites?"

"Me pack all dead. Me used to follow Brutes but me follows him now." Shay pointed at Zimivee. "What there be left of him, anyway. He no like me much, though, so that may not stay either. Who you follow?"

Migpap leaned forward and stated, "Me follow Messiah. Me follow the great one that will lead us home." The other grunts nearby nodded happily at Migpap's words, agreeing to his statement. "He mighty warrior and big for a grunt."

Shay looked at them all, a puzzled expression on his face. "Messiah? You be serious?" He asked, incredulous.

"You not know?" Migpap scratched his head. "He Grunt leader. He talk with elite council and lead elites in battle." Migpap waved his arms happily, showing his enjoyment of talking about the King of the Grunts. "Me fight for him. But Brute Grunts think he fake. They not follow him."

Gridolee overheard the conversation. "It is true. He is an honorable warrior. For a grunt, he has earned the respect that has been given to him. He has even earned the privilege of being called a member of the Mirrator." Doug sat quietly in his seat as he watched Steve fight his exhaustion. All this talk of grunts and leaders and kings wasn't enough to distract him from the idea that soon he would be face to face with Corporal Tyrone.

Migpap continued. "See? You see?" He happily said to Shay. "Lieutenant Gridolee say he mighty warrior. You meet him one day, then you see."

Shay shook his head to clear it. "Me need think about this. You no seem to be lying to me but me still no find it easy to imagine." He shrugged. "No hurt in meeting, yes? Maybe we meet someday."

The pelican's speaker buzzed. "LZ ahead. Prep for fast entry." Chief Raynord quickly moved to the cockpit.

"Radio?" He asked.

"No reply." She said nervously. "It's too quiet down there, Chief."

The co-pilot added. "Tangent went into cover at vector one-kilo. They sent in some scouts, but still no contacts." Chief Raynord looked back to Doug and waved the man forward. Doug stepped up to the Blacks Ops Senior Chief and looked out the forward portal.

"Is your base listening?" Chief Raynord questioned.

"Yes sir. LZ is usually clear to keep Covenant flybys confused of our location. But no way we'd be this quiet if two Pelicans came into view."

Chief Raynord patted Doug on the shoulder. "Get tactical. Lead a scout team to survey the terrain. Eyes and ears only."

Doug nervously shot back, "Yes sir."

Chief Raynord then looked to the Pilot. "Take us Tangent's locale, set us down and go dark. This base may be a ghost town."

"Roger that." She replied. "Tangent, this is Foxtrot, we are on our way to you. Hold position and set up a defense zone."

The line barked back in her ear. "Copy, Foxtrot. Still no word from my scouts, but they may be on radio silence."

Chief Raynord added on the line. "How's the good Doctor, Tangent?"

"Comfy as a baby in a crib." He replied. "I'll keep the science team safe, sir."

9. New Paths

****9: New Paths****

****November 10, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****Southeast Africa, Earth****

Doug stood and moved to the back of the Pelican before looking at the group. He grabbed a rifle and then nodded to two other Marines to follow. Gridolee finished working on Zimivee as Doug leaned close. "He okay?"

"As I've said, he will live." Gridolee answered. "He will be unconscious for some time as his wounds need time to..." Gridolee sat back suddenly as Zimivee moaned and began to sit up. "Stay down, brother. Your wounds need time to heal." Gridolee was stunned to see Zimivee awake after he had been rendered unconscious. He should have been asleep for at least four hours. Gridolee gently pressed Zimivee's shoulder back to the stretcher as the Elite opened his eyes.

He responded to the prompting, but for the second time in a row, he squinted at Gridolee and asked, "MÃ¼n?" This time, with more attention at hand. "Waitâ€¦" He added, as if suddenly realizing his mistake. "Where am I?"

Gridolee answered. "We are outside the human base. Though we have yet to proceed inside. How do you know MÃ¼n?" Gridolee had numerous questions, but for now this seemed the most important.

Zimivee studied him for a long moment before answering. "He saved my life." After a pause, he added, "And I watched him die."

"Then he truly has fallen in combat." Gridolee thought. "I have never met him, but all Mirrator must learn the names of our kinsmen. It is good to know that he died in honor." Doug listened for a short moment, but knew that he had orders. As the Pelican came to a rest he and his small team of two jumped from the back and scanned the area while Gridolee continued to speak with Zimivee.

"He's the whole reason everyone aboard the Radiant survived the battle- the station didn't have any guns." Zimivee mentioned, his gaze tracing Doug's movements as he departed. "He destroyed that shipâ€| but she took him with her when she blew. He got me out." Zimivee looked back at Gridolee. "And he gave me his swords."

Gridolee stood, and moved toward the Pelican's blood tray as Chief Raynord exited the cockpit. He looked back at Zimivee and said, "Then use them well. Rest for now." Chief Raynord stood with Gridolee at the end of the Pelican and gazed outward in the chattered area; keeping watch for any approaching enemies or non-combatants that might be in the area.

Zimivee stared at the backs of their heads for a long moment before resting his head back and staring at the overhead plating above him. After he had regained his wits, he gathered himself up, and curled upwards, to sit more or less on his hooves, only to hunch forward when residual pain from his injuries lanced through him. When it had passed, he straightened, and looked around at the rest of the interior of the Pelican, spotting the group of Grunts, and Shay with them.

He was hard to miss- his scuffed, bloody and muddy breastplate was still fairly shiny. Personally, Zimivee looked like a polished copper penny. Shay bobbed his head, though the gesture didn't immediately appear to own any meaning, as he returned the Elite's gaze.

"You tough warrior." He stated, carefully.

"Hardly." Zimivee muttered, looking back in the direction Gridolee had moved â€" but past him this time, at the scenery beyond the stationary duo. "Master would have been disappointed."

"Me got question." Shay prompted, suddenly.

Zimivee looked at him. "Question?"

"Why you no scowl at Human warriors like everyone else? You no care what they did to big holy relic?"

"The dissent between our respective races is subconscious, Shay." Zimivee answered, bluntly. "I've never met one before. Nor have I witnessed their actions. They are merely people to me â€" people doing what any other of the races might, were their situations similar. It doesn't occur to me to display contempt towards them."

"You no care?"

"Should I? I should think I have enough enemies." Zimivee frowned at the Grunt. "Without adding them to the list."

Doug and his small troop moved through the familiar town that he had been calling home for the better part of a week. As a recon scout, he had familiarized himself with nearly every corner of the town and nearly every location where IFFs, Moles, and lookouts were stationed. He felt somewhat bothered by the idea of not seeing lookouts in the normal locales. He had been gone for no more than two hours at best guess, and that was not enough time for a full re-deployment of the

base. "Chief, this isn't good. I've got no eyes in the familiar places." Doug radioed back to Chief Raynord.

Chief Raynord replied. "Was the base hit?"

"I don't see any sign of battle."

"Get close to the base and let me know how it looks." Raynord radioed back.

Gridolee was listening in and looked to Chief Raynord. "Shall I go and assist?"

"Eyes sharp." Raynord nodded. "I have to stay and watch the Pelicans."

Gridolee looked toward the now mobile Zimivee as he stood in the heart of the Pelican. "Come brother. You could use the exercise."

The younger Elite gave the idea a speculative frown, but he moved out of the craft with Gridolee to follow his direction. Though outwardly silent, and keeping his expression neutral, he thought he had done quite enough exercising of late, often needing to drive himself harder than the cruelest of masters would have just to stay ahead of the Brutes. As for the Human entrenchment—Zimivee had few ideas as for what to look for, where to look for it, or even what to expect. He'd only passed through here, and he'd done it at a phenomenal speed as far as he was concerned. Though still suffering slightly from all he had been through in so short a span, he felt reasonably well enough to meet a foe at ground level, provided said foe didn't get too extravagant with prowess or numbers.

The last thing he wanted to do was freak and panic with everyone watching. Or worse — be overwhelmed and felled for good. The whole reason he was here was for the sole purpose of survival, and getting here only to die would put something of a crimp in his goals. Lifting Mān's swords from his belt, he curled his hands around them, feeling their texture. They were all he owned spare his body that could be considered a weapon, and though he hoped not, something told him he could easily see more fighting rather quickly. This kind of atmosphere was never a good portent to those entering it.

Gridolee slowly paced at Zimivee's side. Standing nearly a full chest taller than Zimivee, Gridolee did not comment on the young Elite's size, however, the reason for bringing him out became quickly apparent. "The Human, Doug," Gridolee began, "addressed you as Zimivee." Gridolee walked around a hollowed building and knelt low as he peered around a corner. Realizing that they were now alone, and far enough away from the earshot of the others, he began to probe the young warrior that had come into the destiny of carrying the blades of the Mirratord. "Hoku Zimivee. Your name carries no honor."

Zimivee looked at him for a long time before answering. "That is primarily because I have no House." He let the comment hang for a moment before adding, "My commander gave it to me at the conclusion of my first mission. He said it wasn't right that a proven warrior retain a nameless status." He kept his head up, his shoulders squared and his voice level, but the truth of the topic was betrayed in his

eyes " he knew how little he had, and he hated all of it.

"Then it is my error. I meant no disrespect. It was only that I was not aware of your house." Gridolee knelt at Zimivee's side and opened his palm toward him. "Let me see your blades."

Even as he passed one of them to Gridolee's hand, Zimivee corrected him; "They are not mine. MÃ¼n asked that I care for them, so I will. But they are not mine."

Gridolee looked into Zimivee's eyes as he took the blade from him. "The blade is what makes the warrior. Upon taking this blade, you vow that you will stand with honor, respect, and penitence of our brothers. Defend our way of life, and hold true the Unwritten law." Gridolee examined the blade hilt and powered it on. "This is what it means to be Mirratord. Your life is no longer important. We harness our skills to better protect our way of life; the Sangheili way of life. Death to anyone who opposes our kin." He powered off the blade and opened the energy matrix panel on the bottom, and replaced it with a fresh charge and sealed it shut. He powered it on again and watched as it glowed brighter, the hum of power was softer, and the energy flow was sharper; a fully charged single blade was a sight to behold. He turned it off and gave it back to Zimivee. He then gave Zimivee another energy matrix for the second blade.

"How you carry yourself, is your own concern." Gridolee said as he examined his own dual blade hilts. "But when you carry these blades you also carry a larger responsibility. My past is stained with mistakes that I can never erase, but I hold true these words in my heart and as a warrior for the council." He looked to Zimivee. "You do MÃ¼n a great service by carrying his blades. But will you carry the weight of those blades to honor MÃ¼n? Or will you hold them and guard them for your own safety? No matter how you answer, I will not judge you any differently."

"I don't know that I would be of great use to such an organization " MÃ¼n did tell me in part what he stood for." Zimivee admitted, looking at the battery. "As for the worth of my life" He looked back at Gridolee. "It never had any to begin with. Why my Master took me from my fate I shall never know, but I have nothing under normal law. I am, nothing. Still, I know what I am and what I am capable of, and I admit I have some doubts as to my value to anything that has to do with your Mirratord. I am not strong enough."

He took his other blade, and replaced the energy matrix in it. Restoring the old one to a pouch on his belt, he looked at the sword for a moment before letting his gaze rest on the other Elite. "You bend. I break."

Gridolee peered around the corner of the building, then looked back to Zimvee. "I will share with you what my master shared with me. No House began with strength. They earned it over time. Every name has a beginning, and with luck those names become powerful. How you choose to fight and what you choose to fight for is entirely up to you. Perhaps in the future, you will have a change of heart." Gridolee stepped into the clearing as Doug rounded the corner, startling the human.

"What have you found?" Gridolee questioned.

"I found them. Looks like only half the company is left, though. Corporal Tyrone pulled everyone inside the base and they are on lock down. They heard our transmission but didn't respond."

Gridolee radioed back to Chief Raynord, while Doug walked closer to Zimivee. "You're up already?"

Zimivee shook his head. "I do not know what I am at this point. All I know is I am very disoriented."

Gridolee turned back to see Zimivee and Doug as the other two Humans kept watch. "We needed to discuss some things. He seemed mobile enough for a small walk. Accompany him back to the Pelican. The Honorable one and I will venture into the base."

Zimivee gave Gridolee a look the other Elite found unreadable, but he turned and began the walk back to where the Pelican had been left, with the Humans. As he went, he mulled over what Gridolee had had to say, but it was sketchy information at best and little of it seemed to tie in to either the situation at hand or even the relevance of his own personal circumstances. Glancing back at Doug, he mentioned, "I do not understand that one."

Doug shrugged as they walked. "What did he say?"

"That the weapon makes the warrior. For some reason I feel I should know what that means, but at the same time it makes no sense to me. Why would one's weapon make who they are? I should think the mind makes the distinction, not the item in one's grasp." Zimivee told him. "Do you still have the cloaking engine?"

Doug flipped his pack open and pulled the device free, while he thought about what Zimivee said. "Sounds like he's talking about some superficial code or something like that." Doug handed the device to Zimivee as they made their way to the Pelican.

Zimivee handed it back. "Keep it. You may find use of it later" I only wondered if you had retained possession."

Doug shrugged again and stuffed the device into his pack. As they neared the Pelican ramp Doug softly asked, "Once the area is secure, I think the Chief and his team will be heading out for their mission. What will you do?"

Zimivee pondered that. "I don't know. I came here looking for them, nearly died, looking for them. Now that I have found one, I am not so sure I have found what I was looking for. I don't even know now if it was really they whom I sought." He turned his head, to look at Doug. "What will become of you?"

Doug lowered his head. "I'll be lucky if I don't spend the rest of the war in the brig or a stockade. But if the company is wiped out here, and if the Chief needs a few more good men, I'll probably tag along with him." Doug sat on the landing gear of the Pelican and opened his canteen of water. He took a sip and offered it to Zimivee.

The Elite looked at it for a moment, before taking it. "It seems a waste of a capable warrior in times like this. One would think your people would need every one they had."

"They do, but in some ways..." Doug leaned his head back and peered into the sky. "... I think we've already given up hope. The Covenant beat us at every turn. Destroyed our colonies and now they're here. And slowly they are killing us off." Doug looked at Zimivee. "If one of the brass thinks that locking me up will make him feel like he won something, some sign of a victory even if it's against his own, he'll do it. But hopefully it won't come to that. Humanity is falling into an abyss of despair."

Zimivee blew a tired sigh. "Brass. You speak of Human echelons? Master always told me that one does best that follows one's own heart. The best of intentions often go astray when one tries to think too big. Disasterâ€|" He gestured at their surroundings. "â€| results."

"You're right about that. So then what does your heart tell you about those you came looking for?" Doug questioned off the top of his head.

Zimivee looked at him, a little puzzled. "I do not know that I have found them." He paused, then added, "Althoughâ€| as much as it seems to me that I have found what remains of the group MÃ¼n followed, I still own doubts that stay my feet from joining them. I realize there isn't much to choose from, nor much time in which to do the choosing, but I justâ€| honestly do not know. I cannot trust easily, Doug. My uses are few, and such people as myself are often bereft of company for their lack. No one needs useless baggage. I understand that. You bend. I break. It's the way I have always been. I don't think it will change."

Doug looked to Zimivee and saw the seriousness within the Elite's eyes. "You've said that before, 'You bend. I break', but I don't get it. What does it mean?"

Zimivee shook his head, as if in thought, before handing the canteen back. "It means there isn't a joint in my body. None of my bones connect â€" and I barely have them. Any other warrior could have walked from that ambush, any other but me. I should have died."

"Wow." Doug said curiously. "No ... joints?" He rubbed his chin, pondering the idea. "Well, I won't try to comprehend how you've managed to survive this long."

Doug's COM burst with static. "Foxtrot, Tangent. Camo the birds and lay low. Doug, come to the base. We're all inside. Bring the Elite and the grunts with you." Chief Raynord ordered over the line.

Doug huffed. "Back and forth, back and forth." He seemed discouraged, but mainly he was hoping that he wouldn't have to face Tyrone.

Zimivee watched as he stood up, relayed the orders to the Unggoy and then started for the base, before making any motion of his own. Falling in more or less beside Doug, the Elite cast the Human a glance. "You seem apprehensive. What is bothering you?"

Doug turned and looked at Zimivee as they made their way from the cover of the well-armed Pelicans, and into the war zone that was once

a small town. Behind them were the pack of Grunts, with which Shay still seemed apprehensive. Doug stated, "Like I said earlier... someone has to take the blame for whatever happened here. Blame is always passed down."

Zimivee could only sigh, and shake his head. "You owe me your life, and I owe you mine. I cannot expect much from that if I allow someone else to take it from you." He seemed to almost smile. "I need friends, Doug. What do you need?"

Doug lifted his head and looked at Zimivee. He formed a half crooked smile and said, "Thanks. What I need..." He pondered. "Hope." Doug laughed at the word, but he soon found no reason to continue. "You have a friend in me, Zimivee. That you can trust. But if things get ugly with the Coporal... don't do anything. We'll let the situation play itself out."

"If that is what you ask of me." Zimivee answered. "Then it is what I will do."

As Zimivee and Doug walked into the base, it appeared that a battle had occurred outside the main door, but the action had not ventured inside. As the pair walked through the blast door they could see the numerous wounded soldiers and civilian workers. Beyond them, were Chief Raynord and Corporal Tyrone. Instinctively Doug lowered his head slightly, but he could feel Tyrone's glare from across the room.

Having no love for the man due to their last encounter, Zimivee cast one back, narrowing his eyes at the Human as he approached, keeping his head high and his shoulders squared "even though most of him still hurt from all the fighting he'd been through. Still, as promised, the Elite said not a word, and made no action against the Corporal.

"That's the man!" Corporal Tyrone yelled as he watched Doug, Zimivee and the grunts cross the expanse of the base. "Chief, that man abandoned his post! We got hit hard because he wasn't in his post!"

Chief Raynord turned to Doug and waved him forward, with Zimivee stubbornly following. "The Corporal here is saying that you were out of your post and because of that your team was hit blindsided by a stray Brute patrol. Private... care to explain?"

"Sir." Doug looked at Chief Raynord's reflective mask and told him the truth. "I was ordered to let the Elite and his grunt company walk out of the base, heading into enemy hands. I decided it would be best if I took the Elite to..."

"You decided?" Chief Raynord snapped. "You were given an order, and no matter how wrong that order may seem, you obey that order. Your action cost men their lives, and you didn't get very far by following your decision." Chief Raynord looked at Corporal Tyrone. "What was your direct order to the young Private?"

Tyrone tensed and mouthed a response but he didn't speak. He then forced himself to talk. "I told him to point the Elite toward the south, and then to report back to his post."

"South of this base is the Mesa?" Chief Raynord questioned. "Brute occupied territory."

"Sir, that Elite is Merc looking for the Mirratord. I didn't want to risk a spy..."

"Corporal, you were going to deliver an ally into the hands of the enemy because you thought he was a spy?" Chief Raynord turned his head and looked to the other soldier at his side. The Black Ops named Mathew, simply shrugged in a confused demeanor. "I have a Pelican outside with some of the best minds on this planet. I have several hundred miles to go before we get to the Gatekeeper Facility, and I have to deal with a rogue Private and jumpy Corporal." Chief Raynord huffed. "Private, take the Elite and the grunt with you and report back to your post."

Doug haltingly saluted, shocked. "Yes sir," and walked away. Zimivee turned and followed him, without a word.

"Corporal, I advise you to lick your wounds, reposition your men, and hunker down. Hopefully we can cut Truth down soon. But until then, this is your watch. And the Elites are our allies. Unlike humanity, most Elites follow a very strict code. It's called honor! If he wanted to spy on you, chances are he would have stayed to kill you during the fight. That Elite and his grunt partner saved two of your men. I don't consider that traitorous." Chief Raynord turned and walked away from Tyrone, leaving the Corporal to his own thoughts.

Doug and Zimivee quickened their pace after Chief Raynord stopped yelling. Doug seemed stunned, "I don't know if he was defending me or crucifying me for later torment. No way Corporal Tyrone is going to forget about this."

"He doesn't have to." Zimivee ground out. "Merc! Where did he get that ludicrous theory? I am not a mercenary! Simply for being alone!" He sighed, frustrated. "Spies, traitors. It is no wonder your kind evoked the anger of the Prophets. Your 'brass' is comprised of honorless curs. He should be lucky I do not cut him down for the insult." He shook his head, both hands curled into fists already but staying down at his sides for the time being. "Fortunately for him, such an action might prove only his view, and would serve no greater purpose. I will not grant him that satisfaction. But nor shall I allow him to seek ruin upon you either."

Doug felt a lot more at ease with Zimivee's words as he looked back and noticed the grunts were following them. "Where you guys headed?"

Migpap replied, "We patrol till we mission ready." Migpap looked over his pack and saw that Shay still wasn't too comfortable with the setting. "Me think you go with them." Migpap said to Shay.

"Them, you, or them, them?" Shay responded, sounding somewhat forlorn. "Me no see place for stray Grunt."

Zimivee didn't turn, but Doug heard him mutter something about not seeing any stray Grunts, in response to Shay's comment. Doug was the only one close enough to hear it, though.

Migpap titled his head in confused gawk, "With them, them? What you mean, them? You no stray Grunt. You follow me pack, and me follow Palab, so you follow mighty Grunt leader as well. See, you no stray."

Doug, ignoring the conversation a few feet behind him, didn't know anything about Zimivee and Shay's bond, if it could be called such a thing, but he felt he needed to speak up. He leaned closer to Zimivee and spoke softly so that only the Elite could hear. "Perhaps we should keep the little guy with us. He did help us out back there. Steve could've been killed."

Zimivee heaved a sigh. "In desperate times one performs with desperate action. Unggoy despise isolation. His rescue of your friend could easily be written off as a simple means of self-serving action." He turned his head slightly, to glance over his shoulder at Shay, in time to catch the smaller creature looking right back, a slightly worried expression on his face. "In this instance one might be inclined to disagree with such a statistical outlook, howeverâ€¦"

"Me no feel comfortable with you pack. Me not know mighty Grunt leaderâ€¦ but it no matter. Me stake me lot already. If it go sour, me knows there no being no second chances, but me already turned me back on sides once. Me thinks that's enough for one war. I'm with the small Elite." He pointed at Zimivee's back, while looking straight at Migpap. "Me mean you faith no disrespect. But me needs to define where me loyalty lie else not even me knows who I works for or against. Me lot is drawn. Me mind is made." He shook his little head. "You and you pack come too late to participate in decision."

Zimivee looked over at Doug. "Do we really have that choice?"

10. Claim Stake

****10: Claim Stake****

****November 11, 2552 Sol Relative Time****

****Southeast Africa, Earth****

The conversation between the soldiers of Earth and a number of imports had seemed to wane, but the thoughts swirling through many of their minds haltered the assumption that any talk was overwith; after having his piece heard, Shay had counted to ten, at which point came the measured response;

Migpap approached Shay slowly and with a glint in his eye as he stated, "You say faith like me in Covenant again. Me not follow simple belief, me follow Grunt King. But me not make you follow leader. He leader like old leaders of great times of Unggoy past. He Messiah cause he lead us away from cruelty." Migpap shook his head, not wanting to turn Shay away, but feeling that the Grunt needed to find his own path. "You come with Elite, you fight good with Elite, but me not know how you fight. Me not see you fight. But me think you best with Elite. You want to be stray Grunt, that you choice, but me still say you have pack if you want." His word came out softer then the rest of the Mirratord grunts had expected. Migpap didn't argue, "Go. We not participate in you decision." The grunt turned and began

to lead his Mirratord grunts into another direction.

Doug watched as the Grunts parted, leaving Shay behind. He then looked to Zimivee, and said, "Nope. The choice is clearly his." Doug continued walking.

The comment made the warrior smile broadly, as if either extremely pleased or extremely amused " but the smile appeared genuine. He didn't say anything more, however, as the alone again Grunt hustled towards them, hurrying to catch up before falling in more or less behind and towards the middle, between the Human and Sangheili in the lead.

Doug rested his rifle against a crumbled polycrrete wall and took a sip from his canteen. He tapped his COM and opened a channel to Steve. "How you feeling, buddy?" "Like crap. But at least I got my mobility back." Steve replied over the COM line. "Doc says I can meet with you as soon as I can get dressed." "Good. I need more eyes out here. Contact me when you're in range." Doug closed the line and sighed as he gazed at the horizon one more time. He looked to his left as Zimivee held his post like a stone, glaring into the cityscape without much fanfare. Shay sat further along the wall, motionless, with his methane tank resting against the wall. Doug thought for sure that the little grunt had fallen asleep. "I almost wish the Brutes would show up." Doug sighed to Zimivee. "We have plenty of numbers now, and I'm getting bored out here."

Zimivee looked at him, surprised. "You bore frightfully quick, for a Human who only two hours ago barely escaped death."

Doug laughed at Zimivee's words, thinking it were a joke. Doug wondered if the Elite even understood what his idle words truly meant. "It's called 'being cocky'." Doug snickered. "I walk a good walk, but when the suck comes I'll be regretting my own words." He peered through his range finder. "In all honesty, I like the quiet. But if want to keep my edge about me I talk like I'm eager for a fight."

Zimivee looked at him strangely, but had no comment for that " the concept was truly lost on him, and he couldn't begin to grasp the gist without further explanation. Added to this was his doubt that he would want to know once he'd actually found out " so all he said, in hopes it wouldn't hurt, was "Okay."

Back inside the base, Chief Raynord began to survey the zone. Corporal Tyrone eagerly wanted Chief Raynord to take the lead, but Chief Raynord had other priorities. "We have to go."

Corporal Tyrone didn't know how to comment. "Sir, please. You can't leave us here like this."

"Once we arrive at the Gatekeeper Facility I'll be sure that someone comes back. We can't abandon this base completely. You held these men together this long, keep up the work." Chief Raynord and Mathew 08 began to walk to the exit. "Foxtrot, Tangent, warm up the engines and kick the tires. I want dust off in ten."

Chief Raynords COMM vibrated. "Roger Chief."

A second transmission echoed, "Tangos inbound, Tangos inbound!

West-delta, they're coming down main street. Looks like they're coming to finish what they started."

Tyrone pulled out his side arm and tapped his COMM, "Position effect trip mines. What's the heavy weapon detail?"

"Six fast movers by two tanks." The spotter shouted back.

Tyrone stumbled with the simple math and Chief Raynord cut in on the silence. "Twelve fast movers. Focus on the tanks but keep a low profile. Don't give up your position unless you absolutely have to." Chief Raynord looked to Tyrone. "Reposition your spotters, but leave some of your men to cover the flanks."

Tyrone nodded as he adjusted his helmet COMM. "All lookouts and scouts. Leave one eye, and reposition to West Delta. Tangos are inbound."

Doug's heart sank as he heard the words on his COMM. "Did he say Tangos, as in hostiles?"

Zimivee looked at him. "If that is what a tango is, then yes. That's what he said. Perhaps you ought to have kept your mouth shut â€" you who seems to be possessed of magic words." The warrior's tone was accusatory, but also in jest â€" he was poking fun at Doug for having wished the scenario upon them, even though he knew the mention had nothing to do with the Brute's deployment or intentions.

"Bad luck or bad karma is more like it." Doug sighed. "Maybe I do talk a little too much." Doug watched as a silhouetted image rested beside him and then began to emerge as an Elite in all black armor. "Christ!" Doug shouted at Gridolee's sudden appearance. "Where did you come from?"

"Do not be alarmed. I just now arrived." Gridolee looked at Zimivee and gave a slight nod. "The human forces are moving into position flanking the road. I intend to flank the Brute's advancing line; to catch them from behind. Will you join me?"

Zimivee looked over at Doug, and decided he was probably better off fighting with allies he was used to at his elbows; whereas Gridolee seemed more inclined to be adaptive, since he too carried close combat weaponry. Looking back at the other, bigger Elite, Zimivee nodded his head.

Behind him, though, Shay hunkered where he was. Here there was good cover; and he couldn't keep up with Zimivee when he was moving fast, so he knew better than to try it with two of them. Nevermind Zimivee's speed and agility was something he had over almost all other Elites. It was only his durability that set him back.

Gridolee climbed from cover, Zimivee directly behind him, and they made their way toward the approaching Brutes. Time was critical at this juncture; they stayed in cover, passing several positioned humans as they moved along the side of the road. A row of buildings made easy cover for a flanking run as the two Elites cautiously made their move. Zimivee noted the odd similarities between his new companion's expert motions and those of the late MÃ¼n Gazenee's, and wondered if it were not due to some unanimous training regimen all Mirratord members had been subjected to.

As they approached their target position a new thought rushed through his already spinning mind; what if leaving the Human and Grunt behind had been a bad idea? He knew already he'd hampered some of Mã¼n's movements and plans, while in the other Elite's presence, but here he felt an overwhelming sense of dÃ©jÃ vu and that it was going to happen again, this time more likely to a more drastic measure of the same end result.

Mã¼n had died, after all, just getting Zimivee's worthless carcass out alive. Cinching his grips on the old warrior's blades, he concentrated on the here and now; he was damned if he was going to let that happen again! This time would be different if only in that Zimivee would go down with everyone else, should anyone perish. It was a worthless sentiment for the most part, and he knew it, but it helped to calm and smooth his rattling nerves so he could think clearly about his situation and react accordingly to it.

Gridolee positioned himself near a pile of debris as the Brute squad moved passed. The heavy gravity thrusters of the two Wraith tanks throttled loudly as they boosted to keep pace with the faster moving Ghosts and Choppers. Gridolee knew that timing was critical. He and Zimivee needed to disable or distract the Wraith tanks as they could lob plasma mortars onto the humans' well-defended positions. "Do not fire until I give the signal." Gridolee whispered into his radio. He hoped none of the more nervous humans would fire too soon, as their lack of discipline would be their demise. He turned to Zimivee and watched as the younger Elite seemed more calm then Gridolee had expected. It was not too surprising however, as Gridolee knew the warrior had seen combat and was well trained. And if a Mirratord warrior had risked his life to save Zimivee, then there was truly something promising about him. "I'll take the farthest target once they pass." He whispered softly. "My cloak will allow me better camouflage. The other tank is yours. Have you any plasma grenades? They do wonders to a Wraith's intake manifold."

Zimivee nodded in response. "I have two. The blades will cut through the armor plating on them, right? The explosive should be better spent without needing to tear through armor before exposing anything vital."

"Yes. One quick swipe and you should be able to see the inside." Gridolee nodded. He recalled his conversation that Zimivee was not as sturdy as most of his kin. Gridolee knew that he could simply punch the grenade into the intake manifold's thin metal grate on the rear of the tank, but Zimivee's fragile structure would not permit such aggressive acts. "On the rear of the tank, you will see the circular glow of the intake manifold. Quickly cut through and insert the grenade. However, you must be cautious. Once we destroy the tanks, the Brutes will quickly be upon us."

Gridolee watched as the tanks slowly moved past their cover position. He looked around to be sure that the Brute scouts had not noticed them and then looked to Zimivee. "It is now or never."

The smaller Elite nodded once, coiled back, and suddenly seemed to blink out of sight; and for all Gridolee's past experience in the field and all his sharp senses, the motion that zipped past in his peripheral from directly in front of him was the only explanation. For being so hindered, Zimivee was hardly helpless, and his

extraordinary speed sent him flying at the first tank like that direction was down, and he were falling at a rate of almost two gees. He latched on with the points of his claws in the seams between plates of welded armor, lit off one sword to free up the manifold grating, stabbed the lit grenade into the deepest recess available, and launched away again.

Turning from his mission, Zimivee realized to his total surprise that Gridolee was not yet even in contact with the second tank " he'd completely expected to be outdone in everything simply as a matter of course. But he didn't hesitate for long, aware his camouflage engine was getting warm and he would soon need to switch to his secondary" with a frustrated growl and wondering what the Mirrator officer was getting at, he moved to the second tank, his last grenade in hand. He could have sworn Gridolee had said he'd take care of the second one" he was halfway there, though, when he had to thrust backwards into a tucked roll before being able to continue forward as a chopper churned past right where he would have been had he not moved.

And it was at that point that he remembered he no longer had his secondary camouflage engine" he'd left it with Doug. Which meant he had" seven seconds" to finish up and obtain cover. Zimivee pulled to his hooves and pushed forward, running past the last chopper in that line and ducking between foot soldiers as he sought the second tank.

Behind him, the first one erupted.

Gridolee had to act fast. Zimivee's speed was much greater than he thought possible. Not since the agile quickness of the Grunt King had he seen something with such grace. Zimivee was already half way to the second tank and the Chopper was barreling at him with an unyielding roar to kill. Gridolee wondered why Zimivee had altered his path back to the second tank. Cloaked and unseen, Gridolee finally climbed to the back of the tank and punched his plasma grenade into the tank's manifold as the vehicle spun to face Zimivee. Gridolee, doing a mental count of how much time he had, climbed to the top of the tank and ran forward as Zimivee dodged the speeding chopper.

"All units attack!" Gridolee ordered into his COMM. He then dived forward at the first chopper that had buzzed passed Zimivee, gripped its side and kicked the Brute from the seat. The Second Tank then ignited in a pulse of blue flame. Human sniper rounds began to zip into the line of foot soldiers as the forward Brute vehicles sped forward to attack the human encampments. Gridolee looked to Zimivee as he powered off his camouflage. Zimivee had already begun to engage the foot soldiers.

He seemed more worrying than anything else, but he did bounce off of one Brute that had run too close in an attempt to bludgeon him down in passing " Zimivee's reaction to the fellow's sudden appearance knocked the Brute back and down, but hardly caused it ill in the least. Spinning to address the more pressing issue of spikes and plasma bolts zipping in at him from practically everywhere at once, Zimivee tucked into a quick roll and came up at the nose of the first tank, which he ran up the front of and hopped over into the partial cover of its flank; at least there, he could only be hit from one or two directions, simultaneously, but he'd missed one deciding factor.

Coming to a stop, he found himself facing a rather irritated Brute who had realized both tanks were dead hulks and soon figured out why; and though the little warrior wasn't quick enough to dart out of reach in time, he just seemed to pull like taffy and fold in all kinds of odd contortions until he'd flipped himself over the Brute's shoulder, from which he planted both hooves on its back and thrust away. He flipped once in midair and landed on his hooves, then returned with active swords, which he used to first slice free both outflung arms and then the creature's head.

Freed of that predicament, Zimivee paused to try to look around and determine friend from foe, so he might know which direction to run to. He looked frazzled, at best, but not panicked. It seemed he knew what he was doing, but he wasn't used to being swamped with enemy.

The Mirratord were trained in various forms of combat. From assassinations to all out war, from hand-to-hand to weapons mastery, a Mirratord warrior is a creature to be feared in any contest. But the unfortunate Brutes were unaware of what the Mirratord was, let alone that one of its youngest and most promising warriors was standing in their midst. The spike rounds bounced harmlessly from Gridolee's energy shield, causing the massive Sangheili to growl in contempt of the Brutes' foolish assault. Turning his eyes from Zimivee, Gridolee dismounted the Brute chopper after stabbing his blade into the control panel and leaving it unusable. He glared at the trailing Brute foot soldiers that had been trailing the two tanks and had seemingly snuck up on him and Zimivee. With a smirk Gridolee gripped his twin blades and powered them on. The Brutes fired wildly, and either the distance was too great or their aim was poor but most of them missed him completely. Gridolee lowered his stance as another wild spike round pinged off of his enhanced Mirratord shield unit. Six brutes against one Mirratord? Pathetic odds and the Brutes would never know what had hit them.

Gridolee charged.

The best weapons in the Sangheili arsenal usually began testing in the hands of the Mirratord. Since the very beginning of the Human-Covenant War, the Sangheili High Council tested the most advanced weapons by giving them to their best soldiers. If anyone could find a flaw in a weapon, it would be those whose lives depended on them the most. The Enhanced Personal Shield Emitter was no exception. Twice as strong as a standard shield and with a faster recharge, the EPSE was the very strength of its wearer. A Mirratord warrior often worked behind enemy lines, or in covert operations of espionage or isolation. If overwhelmed his shield would be his only aid. It needed to be strong, not only in short firefights, but in long drawn out battles. To send one warrior into an enemy's stronghold would generally mean his death, but these shields increased their survival astronomically.

Gridolee sidestepped as a Brute lunged toward him, and with a quick spin his blade sizzled through the Brutes shield and his torso. Another Brute grabbed him from behind, but Gridolee stepped into the Brute's body, causing the beast to stagger backwards. In the split second that the beast lost focus Gridolee stabbed his elbow into the Brute's abdomen, and because of the orientation of the twin blades he had also stabbed the sword into him. Gridolee spun quickly, ripping

the sword out of the Brute's side and ensuring that the beast would die painfully and slowly. He then kicked out at another Brute that had wandered too close.

It was then that Gridolee noticed he was surrounded. There was no sense of panic in his eyes and he completely ignored the battle being waged beyond. For now it was only the recollection of his years of training. An outnumbered Mirratord was a terrifying opponent.

Gridolee recalled the teaching of Ship Master Domadree, his trainer and master during his training. "_If you are fighting one opponent, that opponent is cautious and calculating. But against multiple opponents there is always a sense of overconfidence. One of them will let their guard down, and the others will think that they can overwhelm you. As a Mirratord Warrior, you will learn to attack blindly... but still be focused on killing one target at a time. When we are done with you Gridolee, you will be able to fight an army and walk away unscathed."_

How true were his master's words. Gridolee blindly kicked the Brute nearest to himself, and as if he had eyes in the back of his head, he spun around and slashed his blade through a Brute's face that had attempted to grab him from behind. Plasma began to wash over his shield but Gridolee ignored it and lunged toward another brute, however it was only a feint, and he quickly side stepped toward an unsuspecting Brute holding a brute shot. The beast, stunned by the Sangheili's sudden approach, raised the weapon but never had the chance to fire. Gridolee wrapped the brute shot between his hip and his right arm. He then slid his right single blade up the length of the brute shot, severing the Brute's fingers and forearm, and then raised the blade up through the Brute's chest and head. The other Brutes screamed in rage and attacked in a mass. Gridolee heard their combined charge before he saw them, ducked low and swung his blade in a rising arc. The Brutes tumbled back as blood spat from the thin cuts in their armor.

Gridolee lowered his stance, extended his arms and waited for the Brutes to make another move. The three wounded Brutes staggered backwards, confused and shocked as they looked into Gridolee's death glare. The lone Mirratord warrior was smiling in joy at the carnage of war. "_You must learn not to think, but only to react. And when you learn to react purely on instinct you will be a force that is unstoppable. This is what makes the Mirratord Second and First so powerful; their ability to react on instinct even in the midst of feverish battle. The blades you hold must become more than just a weapon. It must be an extension of your body. The blade makes the warrior, and the warrior is one with the blade. Each blade carries the heart of its warrior, and when you become a master you will understand that the blade is your key to survival."_

The words of his master echoed in his head. Gridolee expanded his chest and roared, "The blade makes the warrior, and the warrior is one with the blade. Each blade carries the heart of its warrior, and when you become a master you will understand that the blade is your key to survival!" The Brutes had no understanding of these words as fear struck them. But before they could become too overwhelmed with thought, Gridolee was once again lunging toward them. He targeted the one that seemed to have lowered its guard the most. Gridolee spun his blade so that it was no longer resting upon his forearm and angled it

length wise away from him. He then stabbed the shocked Brute into the chest, kicked the Brute standing to his left and cut down the one on his right. The last Brute, terrified, attempted to stand and fight, but Gridolee's free blade pierced its throat.

The battle was not over, but for now Gridolee breathed to regain his stamina, and he hoped that Zimivee heard his words.

He had; but though able to give enough pause to look over at the Mirrator warrior during his outcry, Zimivee had been more or less preoccupied with the few straggling Brutes who had not been brave or stupid enough to attack Gridolee. And despite hearing the words, yet again, there remained a loss for understanding. To Zimivee, the blades in his hands represented what he could never be â€" they were certainly not him. They were powerful, unbreakable, unbeatable, hardened tools that felt neither fear nor pain, and never failed when called upon.

They were everything he could only hope for, only dream of achieving. With each swing, thrust and chop, they rendered his enemy to lesser pieces of what they once had been, cut asunder and more often than not, quite dead for the effort. But though long ago lost within that isolating envelope of terror that kept his senses so high strung that nothing â€" not even the light hum of Gridolee's own blades more than a hundred yards away under a deafening cacophany of thunderous gunfire â€" escaped his attention, Zimivee was beginning to realize something he'd not ever been forced to before now. There, in the midst of the worst skirmish he'd ever been unlucky enough to be trapped in the middle of, he was beginning to see how backwards he'd been all those years.

He turned into a slice, tucking his arm against his chest and then extending it again, the blade in that hand cutting cleanly through a Brute on his left before he pulled the other blade down across the face of another one more to his left. A third, unhindered by assault, closed its hands around his throat as he passed it, killing it's fellows, and snapped his head back.

The move would have killed any other Sangheili warrior on the spot. Zimivee simply brought his head back down with the muscles in his neck while walking up the Brute's front pressing against its grasp on him. He coiled, cut both arms off, and sprang away, to somersault and land on his hooves and ready for the next three that attacked at once. He was too fast to catch many blows, but the ones that did land he either curled around or bounced back from as if made purely of elastic. It hurt â€" it all hurt â€" but the pain was little more than bruise worthy, and he smiled his own feral, mirthless smile as the last fell in pieces and more approached.

Fixating a deadpan, blank and vacant stare on the first to step forward, Zimivee mouthed the words he'd been saying almost all his life, but in reverse; "I bend. You break." And then he launched his small frame at the beast like one of his larger brothers might have, blades first.

11. Firewall

**11: Firewall **

****November 12, 2552 Sol Relative Time ****

****Southeast Africa, Earth****

While the two Elites caused a mass of confusion and sabotage at the rear of the Brute attack, Doug, Shay and Steve did their best to simply stay alive as the Brute vehicles crisscrossed the road only a few yards away. With his battle rifle tucked firmly on his shoulder, Doug fired at the driver of a Chopper that streaked past. The Brute's shields popped, but Doug couldn't find a clear shot to finish it off. Despite this, as the Brute sped away he was cut down by a sniper shot from another stationed Marine in the distance.

"They keep coming!" Doug shouted. "How many are there?"

Steve chuckled, "I don't know. How many monkeys does it take to kill a base of humans?" His words were slurred and he laughed loudly at his own joke; the after affects of the morphine shot he had received before racing to Doug's side. But even in his drugged state, Steve tossed near perfect grenades into the advance of Brute foot soldiers. He completely ignored the bloody field wrap that was around his arm.

Doug didn't bother trying to answer Steve's untimely joke.

"Me no counting them." Was all Shay had to offer, unsure of the tone Steve had used but familiar with the drugged slur. He held the stud on his plasma pistol, and a charge grew at the contacts, building up to a super hot sizzling glow before he aimed and released it, following the winding overcharge with a few single shots, so it knocked a Brute from his seat at the controls of a chopper and then pegged at him several times before he realized where his antagonist was coming from. "Die!" Shay commanded, firing faster, but even as the Brute's armor boiled away or popped off for lack of fixture, it dropped to its knuckles and charged at them, snarling loudly. At the fifty-meter mark, though, the little Grunt nailed it squarely between the eyes with a plasma grenade and redirected its attention as the charge fused to its face in blinding pain. "Wow. Me not know me aim so good." Shay commented, almost casually. "That me best throw yet!"

Doug ducked as the Brute's body was engulfed in a flash of blue. "Good stick!" Doug cheered as he took aim and emptied his clip into another nearby Brute. The strategy was working well. Without the tanks lobbing plasma mortars onto the human lines, the Brutes were caught in a crossfire. Humans on either side of the road were picking the Brutes apart.

Steve sank behind cover and pulled a pack of smokes. He put one in his mouth and giggled as the last of the Brute front line was taken down. "They say these things will kill me." He laughed as he lit it with a lighter and took a long drag. Doug kept watch for any stragglers as cheers erupted around the road. Yet Doug was more concerned about the sound of weapons fire still echoing several blocks away. Surely Zimivee and his Mirrator partner still had their hands full.

After a moment, Shay cast a glance down at Steve. "You head no on right. You need have Human healer look at you again, you no be this way before."

Steve laughed, "I've never been this right!" He blew out a long stream of white smoke as Shay waved the smoke away from his methane rebreather.

Doug added, "He's okay. It's the pain drugs. The right amount can ease your pain and make you feel... well, a little bit off."

Shay made false coughing noises behind his mask. "Me no think this be right." He decided, before hopping away and looking around as he listened. "Why me still hear fire? We no win?"

Shay's words verified what Doug was also hearing. He tapped on his COMM, "Chief Raynord, I have confirmed kills of enemy advance. However, weapons fire still radiating from Brute's AZ. Gridolee and Zimivee may need help. Requesting permission to engage."

Doug's COMM radioed back. _"Do not engage. I repeat, do not engage. The Mirrator can handle their own. And judging by your friend Zimivee, I don't think he'll need the support. Reset your defenses and finish off any wounded Brutes. Raynord out." _

Doug sighed over the line and looked at Shay. "We won, but Zimivee is still under fire. I have orders to stay put."

Shay stared at him in silence for several moments before speaking; "I don't." With a glance spared at Steve, the little Grunt crawled from their cover and raced across the streets on all four of his limbs to make better time. Whatever stragglers he knew the Humans could handle, so he dove ahead with abandon, hoping to at least see what was going on before it was all over with and too late for his arrival to hold any meaning.

He rounded the last corner and stopped, watching the tangle of Brutes around the two Elites. He noted with disdain that they had been separated, his pack-oriented senses telling him how bad that situation must be for each, but every time he thought he was fixing to see them die, he didn't.

In the middle of a group of six, Zimivee had never twisted or turned so much so fast. Each motion fed into the next, forming a kind of dance that was sadly disjointed. On occasion, he'd knock one down so hard and fast it was obvious to all that he'd killed it, but he'd arrived at the base worn and tired and he'd long since run out of energy. He was running purely on adrenaline, but even that could only hold him over for so long.

He pulled from one Brute before it could fall and hit the next, but he'd slowed down enough that another Brute caught him by an arm, and in trying to break it by wrenching it in the wrong direction, turned Zimivee's wrist and cut his own hand right off. Pushed from his balance, though, the Elite crashed to the bloodsoaked ground, and despite an utter lack of obvious injury taken, he stayed there â€" motionless.

Shay frowned, and shook his head. He'd expected thatâ€¦ but looking over at Gridolee, he found the Mirrator Elite had practically decimated everyone around him.

Gridolee's massive size fooled many upon first glance; thinking him

to be slow and clumsy. But Gridolee was far from this. He was graceful, powerful and quick. But Gridolee had always been an Elite that prided himself in his power. The Brutes' numbers gave them the confidence that many had had in such a situation, but the same numbers once again proved their downfall. One by one Gridolee cut them down, his movements nearly matching Zimivee's, yet lacking the younger Elite's flexibility. Gridolee's swords were a blur of motion as he exhaustingly cut down one after the other. And when the Brutes stepped back to regather their numbers, and courage, Gridolee focused his mind away from his exhausted body.

Every muscle burned, his lungs heaved air frantically to keep his hearts pulsating, and his eyes whipped from Brute to Brute. One of them lurched on to his back, surprisingly, but Gridolee drove his blade into the beast's side and then kicked out at the next Brute that lunged forward. With a quick twist of his hip, Gridolee tossed the wounded one from his back and into the mass of others gathering at the side. The Brute growled, tumbled and pulled three of his kin to the ground. Gridolee leaped forward and cut into the staggering, groping pack, killing them all quickly as he attempted to once again gather his breath. His limits of adrenaline were quickly coming to an end as he stood and snarled at the last few Brutes that remained. Spike rounds pinged against his shields and turned to see the lone Brute firing from a sizable distance.

As Gridolee turned to attack the beast, he saw a motionless form lying in a pool of Brute blood. Zimivee had fallen, though it appeared that no wounds were on him. Gridolee quickly tossed a plasma grenade at the spike-wielding Brute, but the creature had plenty of time to get clear. Gridolee was thankful for the Brute retreating, if only for a moment it gave him time to think as he sprinted toward Zimivee's body.

Gridolee could hear the grenade explode and the sound of Brutes running toward him, but for now his only concern was Zimivee. Dead or alive he was not going to leave the young Elite to sit alone. Gridolee planted his feet as he stood near Zimivee, turned and faced the approaching horde. With a long inhale of fresh air Gridolee prepared himself for the few Brutes that remained. His years of training, testing, and endurance was paying off, as it always had, but like any of his brothers within the Mirrator'd he was not going to leave Zimivee behind.

In the still afforded him, the smaller warrior stirred, and with a muted cough pushed the ground away in an attempt to rise. One blade had been dropped, burning brightly against the muddy ground, but the other had been deactivated or damaged beyond operational capability, and was still in his hand as he dragged that arm from beneath him. He lifted his head, to see what had happened, blinking blearily as he sought focus. He looked farther up, then, when he realized what Gridolee was doing, then past him at the remaining Brute forces. He cinched his grip on his one remaining sword, unsure where the other had fallen until he saw it, still active, several paces away. Clawing for purchase he forced himself back to his hooves, and staggered back to his knees at the second sword rather than simply squatting as he had intended. Picking it up, he turned to look back at the Mirrator'd. Nothing could touch him, and even after so much exhaustive fighting he looked ready to meet the next full armada.

Awed, Zimivee forced himself back upright, determined not to let

anything stop him from what he now perceived as a goal " to be just like that. Waves of crippling pain affected the posture of his stance, but though he knew Gridolee must see him there he hoped he didn't look as miserable as he felt. He wanted nothing more than just to fall down and die, even though he had no want to endure such an ending.

Gridolee could hear the bloody gravel beneath Zimivee's feet as he stood, but he did not give the warrior any assistance. Gridolee was beyond exhausted, and could barely support his own weight. His eyes scanned the crowd of Brutes, ready to send each and every one of them to their graves. He tightened his grip on his left blade hilt, but no matter how hard he squeezed, he could still feel the blade slipping from his grip. His calves burned with each reflexive movement to walking, and his shoulders felt as though they were holding iron weights. But through it all Gridolee continued to convince himself that he was still in control. His mind blocked out the exhaustion, the pain, and even the cramp that was forming in his lower back. He was impressed that Zimivee was able to get back to his feet, as a normal Elite would have let exhaustion overwhelm them long ago. MÃ¼n truly had seen something unique in Zimivee.

Three Brutes jumped forward. Gridolee countered and put them down in a flash, but his breathing intensified. He stepped back to Zimivee's back and tried to regain control of his breathing before Zimivee noticed, but the harder he struggled to catch his breath, the darker his vision became. Not even his mind was able to fight the impending warning of too much energy lost. Gridolee opened his COM line and muttered, "Honorable... one... Brutes at the rear... too many... need assistance..." Gridolee glared forward as darkness slowly filled his eyes. His balance became shaky as his equilibrium slowly shut down. His arms lowered to his side, but through his hazy eyesight he saw something move close to him. The outline was clearly a Brute and with what little energy he could muster he swung his blade and felt the creature's flesh give under his power. A Brute yelled out a deathly call as it thumped into the mass of bodies at Gridolee's feet.

"Zimi... vee... watch... your back." Gridolee slumped forward to his knees and hands as his mind and body shut down from over exertion.

Zimivee looked down at the collapsing Mirratorid in horror " but it translated into anger and denial, fueled by defiance as he tore into the Brute that suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Even after having fallen onto his own swords, the little Elite was laughing in the face of his enemies, kicking and cutting the few left down that got within reach. If he let Gridolee die, it would weigh on him for the rest of his life.

"You're not going to do to me what MÃ¼n did." Zimivee screamed at him. "Get up! Get up!" It never occurred to him that Gridolee could no longer hear him, blacking out and shutting down at the end of his ropes. Finally, he faced the last one, the Brute holding a power drainer device in one hand, and a Brute shot in the other. He activated the one, and flung it at Zimivee, completely killing what little shielding he'd managed to accumulate.

Zimivee collapsed around it on impact, but he'd caught it by design, and fallen due to exhaustion. The Brute stepped forward, puzzled that

the device would have 'killed' his enemy, but he only caught it in the face when Zimivee threw his broken and bloody body from the ground again. The Brute bawled, and staggered back, one of the device's tripod feet putting out one of his eyes.

Snarling with animalistic abandon, Zimivee grabbed the Brute by his bandolier, and sunk his claws in as he felt himself dragging. The Brute realized he was there too late, at the same instant that he drove the long end of the blade through its collarbones so the tip end protruded through the beast's spine. The Brute gurgled weirdly, and plopped over backwards in the mud, Zimivee on top of it. He pushed it away, though, disgusted, and dragged his sword from the wound before bothering to shut it off. Dropping off the side of the body, he crawled back to where Gridolee had wound up, and grabbed him by his armored vest, shaking him.

"Get up, get up." His voice had narrowed to a hoarse rasp, but he kept insisting anyway. "Get up, I can't carry youâ€|" Seeing for the first time that Gridolee was unresponsive at best, he tried to anyway â€" tugging and pulling in vain with all the strength he had left, which was none, desperately trying to get him away from what could easily turn back into a target rich environment again. "I'm not leaving you behind again, not this timeâ€|" Zimivee muttered, hardly able to maintain his grasp on the bigger Elite at all. "Get upâ€| please, just get up."

A voice echoed in Gridolee's ears; distant and unclear. The words were feverish, but Gridolee could not distinguish what they were. All he knew was that his body felt separated from his mind. He tried to shake the cobwebs from his head, but his body couldn't move. He tried opening his eyes, but even this act was too taxing.

Sleep.

Gridolee wanted to rest, to let his mind and body recover from the rigors of combat.

Combat.

What had he been doing? Why was he so exhausted? What had drained him to this level of unconsciousness? The only functioning part of his body appeared to be his breathing, and with the rest of his body lost in the thralls of total energy loss, only his hearts and lungs seemed to function properly. Yet as he breathed, a familiar stench brushed into his nose and tingled the receptors of his mind. Its familiar bite upon his memory began to restart Gridolee's mind. A quick burst of panic washed up and down Gridolee as he realized he had blacked out during combat. The sensation of fear quickly alerted his body into generating even more adrenaline, and the extra boost was quickly forced into his muscles.

Unconsciously, Gridolee's body jolted upward. His mandibles parted wide and an ancient barbaric growl filled deep within his chest. Completely mindless of his surroundings, Gridolee's primitive instincts awoke to defend his subconscious form. Only instincts controlled him as he lurched forward in a predatory hunt. He pushed Zimivee to the side as his head swiveled toward the nearest Brute body. He lunged forward, drove his twin blades into the body and growled as he sniffed the dead Brute. He raised his head and sniffed the air, hunting for a live target, stalking a Brute but none were

near. They had already been slain. The urge to fight slowly began to fade as his mind quickly restarted itself. The darkness in his mind began to part like a veil as Gridolee powered off his blades and stood taller, but with a constant imbalanced sway as he tried to regain his balance. He pulled off his helmet and dropped it to his side as he lifted his head skyward; the action allowed him to breathe easier as sweat raced down his face and neck. Gridolee then heard a shuffle at his side and he quickly darted his eyes downward and Zimivee's smaller form. He exhaled heavily, grateful that the young warrior still lived, and once again raised his head to breathe.

Zimivee stared up at him with an expression not at all unlike pure terror "and even as he struggled to push even the slightest resistance, he seemed determined to get clear of Gridolee. Yet even as he did so, his widened eyes had glazed, his own breath shallow and strained. "Flood" He whispered. "All Flood"

Gridolee regained his focus and turned to watch Zimivee's panicked gaze. "Flood?" Zimivee had said it softly, but the word Flood stood out like an explosion in Gridolee's ears.

Within a heartbeat Gridolee's COMM began to crackle. "_Say again, Lieutenant! Gridolee do you copy?"_

Gridolee leaned down and picked up his helmet, "I am here Honorable one. The situation is under control. Support teams can be sent to my location, but be wary of possible stragglers as well as reinforcements."

>
"Understood. Corporal Tyrone is repositioning his units now. Fall back to the Pelican, we need to get going before the Brutes decide to push again."_

Gridolee looked to Zimivee as Shay began to approach from out of a crumbled building. "I will be there momentarily." He closed the COMM and unbuttoned a long thin tube from his vest. He placed a plastic hook, attached to the end of the tube, onto the base of his mandibles and began to drink the mixture of water, vitamins and nutrients. His muscles still quivered from the overexertion but the tasteless fluid would sustain him until he could get rest and a decent meal. He gingerly walked toward Zimivee as the word Flood still lingered. With a rasp in his voice he questioned, "What did you mean? Flood?"

Zimivee scrambled to his knees and then to his hooves, backing away from him with a wearied stagger. "No!" It quickly became clear he'd lost some cognitive function along the way, and had become delusional, seeing Gridolee's snap back to action as a kind of Flood-like reanimation. He stumbled, fell back down again, stayed there gasping shallowly as his injury bubbled blood. He clutched at it, as if only partly aware of the depth or severity of the injury, but the blood only seeped past his fingers. "I don't I don't want to die." He rasped, his gaze riveted on Gridolee even though he couldn't really see him. The next thing he muttered was neither coherent nor intelligible.

Gridolee came closer, hearing the rambling of the young exhausted mind. He stalked closer and growled detest. "I am Mirrator, young one. But I am also only flesh and blood. Had the second been here, you would not have seen such a shameful display on my part. The

second, is a machine of stamina and grace. I... I am but a husk in his shadow." Gridolee reached out and grabbed Zimivee's vest. "There is no Flood here, only the desire to be victorious in combat!" Gridolee's eyes raced around Zimivee, exercising caution that the young warrior didn't attempt to draw his weapon. He then pulled a similar tube from Zimivee's vest, but it had long since been emptied of its contents. Realizing that even a little of the tasteless energizing drink would help restore some his energy, Gridolee pulled his tube from his mouth and quickly gave it Zimivee.

Zimivee naturally protested, guarding against Gridolee's presence and attempt to put the tube's hook in his mouth. Gridolee huffed. "I lost consciousness, but my natural instincts was to continue, and that is what I did. When you are trained to the point of breaking, you should know that you will eventually surpass it. Did not your master teach you that even at deaths door you can still fight?" Shay loomed closer, though did not interrupt. Gridolee snarled as Zimivee continued to resist. "Did he not push you to your breaking point, and show you that there is more that you can do even at the edge of darkness? I am not Flood, brother. I am a Sangheili through and through!"

Zimivee shuddered and gagged on the fluid before any of it was swallowed, sputtering for a moment as his thirsty metabolism quickly assimilated the fresh influx of nutrients. Slowly his mind came back online, and he curled his fingers around Gridolee's arm, breathing hard. Blinking the dazed film from his eyes, he turned them to the Mirratord's face, a seeming empty expression in them. Despite this, he spoke. "He did so require." It was barely above a whisper in volume, but it was a statement bold of fact and memory. "He was satisfied with nothing less."

Gridolee gripped Zimivee's shoulder, gave him a reassuring shake and smiled. "Breathe, and drink." He pulled the pack of fluid from his vest and gave it to Zimivee. He then exhaled as he sat at his side. "We are all vastly different, brother, but you have shown me your strength today. You are worthy of the name granted to you, and the reformation of a new house. If this battle does not claim us all first."

Gridolee noticed that Shay kept his distance, watching, but not coming too close to interfere. Gridolee then turned to Zimivee, "You fight with a wild passion that no other can match. Your flexibility is your greatest asset." Gridolee massaged a wound on his side. A Brute had taken a lucky punch, but it was only a bruise. "You indeed bend, while most break."

Zimivee polished off the fluid, and let the pack rest in the mud beside him. "Worthy." He rasped. "I am exhausted. Fear is what drove my actions, fear what enabled me to beat themâ€¦ fear what drove me here, in search of the promise MÃ¼n spoke of. I had nothing to lose but my own lifeâ€¦ as such, I cling to it fiercely." He heaved a sigh, and looked at the larger Elite. "I would know moreâ€¦ of thisâ€¦ Mirratord."

Gridolee lifted the corners of his right mandibles as he sat on a piece of a crumbled instacrete wall. "Fear... is a life saving emotion." Gridolee lowered his head. "Can one really say that they have no fear? I cannot. Even with the training of my masters, and the relentless pushing of my kin within the Mirratord ranks, I still have

fear. But that fear, I have learned, can be harnessed. The First, our leader, once told me that 'to be afraid is not a weakness unless it stops you in your tracks'. If fear caused you to fight the way you did, then you are far stronger than you think."

Gridolee turned his eyes back to Zimivee. "The group you seek, the one MÃ¼n swore his life to, is called the Right Hand of the Sangheili High Council. We are trained to be the best, to do the tasks that many would consider impossible, and to do them without fail. We are the Mirrator'd. A group that does not exist, yet here we are. We are bound to the Unwritten Mirrator'd Law; to do harm to the Sangheili way of life is to die by Sangheili hands. For this we say, For the Honor of the Mirrator'd. We hold this in great esteem. We fight to protect not just ourselves, but for our kin. This is why MÃ¼n saved you. His life was forfeit the day he was inducted into our ranks, just as mine has been." With a soft sigh Gridolee added, "And I would have happily given my life today, in order to save you. MÃ¼n gave you those blades, his blades, so that you would fight on. The blade makes the warrior, and even in death he fights on at your side. Those Twin Blades are what make you, who you are. You are no longer the warrior you left behind. Once you met MÃ¼n, your life changed. Just as mine did when I first met my master in training."

Zimivee coughed once to clear his throat. "Now that last, at least, I have no doubt of. He certainly changed a lot for meâ€¦ did you know I was mistook for one of you, and the Prophets sent more than eight cruisers of Brutes to rout me from my hiding place? I had never been so important to anyone before in my lifeâ€¦ and it gave me perspective when I realized why they kept right on coming, hunting me so fevrently." He sighed. "And do you know what I did, upon this discovery? Me, whom a great warrior had fallen to keep alive, me, carrier of his bladesâ€¦ I ran. I took my pride and I fled without honor. I knew it would preserve the others I was leaving behind, if but for a moment longer, but I didn't do it for them. I ran because I was scared, because I didn't want to die, and I knew better than to think I could take everything the Prophets had to throw at me and still be standing after. I came to Earth because I thought I would find protection hereâ€¦ because MÃ¼n had spoken so highly of his brothers at arms, and I hoped to find amnesty behind them when the next volley of ships came for me." He shook his head, and touched at his mandibles, before studying the little rivulets of blood dribbling from his fingertips down his hand. "I ranâ€¦ and I foughtâ€¦ out of fear. I have nothing to fight forâ€¦ save a wisp of a memory of a warrior I didn't ever really know, but had the great honor of meeting. I often wonder, and seek to discover, just what it was he saw in me, yet I cannot seem to find it." He looked over at Gridolee. "What am I? Why am I important, what makes me special, that so many of such honor and valor seek to preserve me? More, why can't I see it?"

Gridolee stood and fixed his gear. The blood of his enemy still dripped from his armor, and besides the smell, it was only an eye sore. He looked to Zimivee and stated directly, "If you were another, I would still defend you. Are you weak? No, you are not. Are you frail, unable to fight for yourself? No, you are not. Are you my brother in arms? Yes, you most certainly are." Gridolee huffed. "You have doubts, you have fear, is that so wrong? No. I have seen fear, I have felt it, but I do not let it cause me to hesitate. You want to know what you are? You are a Sangheili warrior. Different from most, that you may be, but you are our brother and that is all you need to

feel. Is there more to you than this?" Leaning forward, Gridolee placed his hands to Zimivee's shoulders. "My honor is no greater than yours. You have no house, but this does not hinder your skill or your honor. You fought to live, you ran to live, and now you have arrived at the heart of the final battle; Earth. If you were truly afraid you would have never stayed on this doomed world. We Mirratord go to our doom with every action, but we fight so that we may live... and that our kin would not know this suffering. And those of skill often enough find themselves at our side, facing impossible odds and seeking to be victorious."

Gridolee cupped Zimivee's head within his left hand and pointed to the bodies of Brutes that littered the battlefield. "You did this! I did not kill so many alone. And you stood by my side even when I began to fade; you stayed. You are a warrior, my brother. Like us all. And those who died to protect you could only hope that you, in turn, would do the same for them."

Zimivee nodded, looking over the strewn dead. "I understand." He turned his gaze back to Gridolee. "So then as I carry the blades of one of yours, the world against me and only you at my back— what then? Where from here do I go? If for nothing else I am lost. I don't know that I understand what it fully means to be one of your— Mirratord. But I grasp the concept." He sighed, and wiped his mandibles on an arm. "I guess what I'm asking for is direction."

Gridolee laughed, deep and out loud. His mandibles stretched wide as tears welled up in his eyes from his uncontrolled outburst. Surprised by this, Zimivee stared at him awkwardly. He was not amused. Gridolee calmed his laugh and looked at the younger Sangheili at his side. "Forgive me, Zimivee." He sighed as he attempted to regain his breath. "For some reason, I find that rather amusing. Direction? The Mirratord has been split in all directions, using what resources we can wherever we are needed, and the Council has not communicated with us since we left Camp Eden. The most I can tell you... is to look to our smaller companions; the humans and your Unggoy follower. Help them survive during these hellish times."

Gridolee and Zimivee's COM vibrated, _"Lieutenant Gridolee, we are leaving. Or have you forgotten."_ Chief Raynord's voice barked.

"I copy, honorable one." Gridolee closed the channel. "I would bring you with me, but I feel you can be more useful here. These humans could use one of your skill... though the option to stay here is up to you." Gridolee motioned to begin the trek back to the pelicans. "Our duty is to fight, to protect, and defend. Right now, the fate of the universe is merely a stones throw away. We must all do our parts to help preserve the future."

Zimivee nodded, understanding. "Fair enough, I suppose." He struggled to get back to his hooves, but once there, though he wavered, somehow he held his pose. Taking a breath, Zimivee followed Gridolee as he walked back to the base. "I will keep them alive— if it is the last thing I do. But when there is nothing left to fight, when the battle is over— will you return? Spare where my talents are needed I have nowhere to go, no place I belong. Would you come back for me?"

Gridolee watched as Chief Raynord and the others began their slow and

cautious walk back to the landing zone. He turned to Zimivee and said, "If I live to see another day, or perish in the coming battles, you shall not be left behind. While on my journey to the human base I will be sending a report to the Second. He will see your worth. I cannot guarantee his actions, but the Second and the First would never leave a living warrior behind. I will also recommend that you receive further training from the Council. We'll make a Mirratord of you yet... whether you like it or not." Gridolee glared at Zimivee and smirked; raising his left mandibles in a pleased fashion. Gridolee unclipped his three equal length purple bars from his left chest plate, and then aggressively slapped them upon Zimivee's chest. "For now, take these and wear them with honor. This is not official, but it does allow you to speak with any of our Mirratord brothers. Normally, if you speak of the Mirratord, they will not heed your words, but with these bars and your twin blades they will know that someone has welcomed you. Had you not spoken of MÃ¼n, and shown me your blades, I would not have talked to you either. MÃ¼n was wise not to give you his bars before his death. He must have sensed your hesitation." Gridolee chuckled. "I am not nearly as patient as he."

Gridolee watched as Migpap and the other grunts waddled up the ramp of the Pelican, soon after the engines began to whine to life. "Any last questions, brother?"

Zimivee's responding smile was mirthless. "Why do you keep trying to make this all out to be some kind of threat? Whether I like it or notâ€¦ I want it because there seems nothing else within my grasp, it is what I have been reaching for, for some time now. But if the Mirratord be so noble, whence then come this odd approach toâ€¦ is it recruitment?" He asked, picking idly at the bars that had been haphazardly applied to his armor. "As I recall, MÃ¼n had something called a sense of humorâ€¦ _normal_ humor. You have yet to cease trying to play mind games with me since we first spoke."

"Recruitment?" Gridolee pondered. "Were those the words they used when I was first abducted into this clan of murderers and assassins? Do you really wish to know of the inner meaning behind The Unwritten Law?" Gridolee stepped closer, looking down upon Zimivee's shorter stature. "I can only offer you a glimpse into our world. Our past. I have yet to mix my words in an attempt to trick your mind. It is merely the approach of our order. You must be strong willed, of mind and body, to tolerate the stress that is involved with being an agent of the Mirratord. If I have made this all seem to be a threat, then that is because I would prepare you for the future." Gridolee folded his arms across his chest. "No, you are one that wants direction and clarity. So then let me be more blunt. I am a murderer. I have slain Watchmen, children of our kin. I killed elders, even their defenseless mates. Young, old, and all in between have fallen upon my blades in the name of the Council. MÃ¼n, he too shared these secrets, these painful memories. Humor was his escape, pride and strength are mine."

"Each of us, from the First down to the newest Mirratord warrior, has to find a way to deal with the tasks placed before us." Gridolee's tone became more direct, heavy, as if there was true pain behind his words. "To kill your own brother for the benefit of our race, is not something one can hide easily. We all fight the pain, yet put up a strong face to push on to our next assignment. There are many

warriors like MÃ¼n, unfortunately I am not one of them.

"We are assassins, but we are noble. Noble? How can such a thing be said of those who kill the young and the old. Does that disgust you? Do you still wish to carry this weight upon your heart? Yet before you answer, see the meaning of our acts. Those I have killed, murdered and assassinated, were Corrupt Elders who would sell Sangheili young into slavery. Sangheili young who were raised on the belief that our Elders were traitors to the Great Journey. Females who were genetically altered by the Prophets in order to carry a mutation that would limit our bloodlines, and their children who carried this mutation, all living in luxury and thinking that what they were doing was for the benefit of their gods. Killing a prophet or a Brute is always a welcome task, but to receive orders from the council, orders that tell you to kill a female who once grew up in your own province..." Gridolee couldn't finish the statement; lowering his eyes hurtfully.

"Their deaths were justified, at least in word, but to kill your own kin... is not something that can be looked upon lightly." Turning away from Zimivee, his head hung low with the memories of his Mirratordeeds, Gridolee added, "this is why it may seem that my words are cryptic. Being a member of the Mirratorde is an honor... and a curse. You will carry secrets in your hearts until the day you die.

>Yet these same secrets will prolong the longevity of our kin. Not everyone can do such things. Each of us come from different backgrounds. I even recall the Second telling me that he had no desire to join the Mirratorde. That he all out refused. But now he is amongst one of our most respected and honored warriors. No warrior questions Simyaldee's orders. Not even the First."<p>

Gridolee turned back to Zimivee, "Few are chosen, and none walk away. You have everything it takes to be amongst us. No house, the skill of a warrior, and the uniqueness of your body. MÃ¼n saw it, he must have." Gridolee huffed. "Forgive my outburst. How can I make this clearer? How can I show you the truth? To show you that what you may be seeking is not what you think it might be; it is far more honorable, and horrifying than you may have first thought."

Zimivee studied him for a time in silence before simply nodding. "I understandâ€| you mean to warn me, that while what you do is justified, it does not change the nature of what you do in the least. That much I have already known, Gridoleeâ€| it is hardly alien to me." He inhaled, as if pausing to gather his thoughts. "With youâ€| what you do is right. Atrocious, unforgivable perhapsâ€| but right. Without you to fall back toâ€| and since no one else appears to even want to consider my inclusionâ€| I'm as good as fallen and forgotten already. I have nothing to hide, and everything to hide from. I will follow youâ€| because you have been honest with me." He raised the unlit hilts for Gridolee to see. "Becauseâ€| while it be my only apparent path at this time, I would walk it with my head high. I would be one of youâ€| if you'd have me."

Gridolee nodded approvingly. "Then the first step has been made." Turning to the Pelican, he added, "I have already delayed the honorable human long enough. We will not leave you behind, brother. Guard this human outpost as best you can, but be cautious. Either the Second or the First will make contact with you soon." Gridolee quickly raced up the ramp of the Pelican. As the ramp began to close,

and the pelican engines roared louder, Gridolee looked back and crossed his right fist to his chest; covering his heart and bowing his head to the Sangheili youth that was now a new trainee within the ranks of the Mirratord.

Zimivee imitated, before watching as the Human vessels gained altitude and flew away. Breathing out, he looked down, at his palms, before shaking his head, turning and walking slowly towards the Human base. Shay hopped up beside him, and paced him.

"You made of metal?" The little Grunt asked, tentatively.

Zimivee shook his head. "No."

"You should be dead." Shay told him. "Anyone else be dead by now, you have too many holes in you. You no even satisfied with what big ugly Brutes do, you stick your own self once! How you even standing?"

Zimivee's smile was faint. "I'm too damn stubborn to break that easy." He looked down at the Grunt. "I bend. You break."

Shay just shook his little head, bemused. "Me break, maybe, but you more than bend, you crazy."

Zimivee gave a soft chuckle. "Gods know I do want to dropâ€¦ I can't remember the last time I had any sleep."

"You no eaten in at least two days, now, too." Shay reminded him. "You made of metal."

As the two Pelican took flight, Doug and Steve watched with a bit of dismay. The battle was indeed over and Tyrone had ordered numerous scouts to clean up the rest of the living Brutes, but it was only a temporary victory. "You know what I hate about drugs?" Steve hissed as held his bandaged arm. "What?" Doug replied. "When the drugs wear off, and you realize that you really are in pain." Steve grimaced and held his arm. "Medic!" Doug shouted out to a nearby pack of marines. Steve wasn't in danger; his wounds were properly taken care of, but Doug didn't think that his friend would be too useful holding his throbbing arm. He then turned and watched as Shay and Zimivee walked toward them.

The Elite paused shy of joining them, to cock his head at Doug's expression, but Shay hopped into their foxhole without even a moment's hesitation.

"Now you look more normal." The Grunt decided, spotting Steve. "You and him both, me swearâ€¦ no sense of pain in the lot of you!"

Zimivee didn't bother to look, but he smiled anyway, amused. For the first time in a long time, he could feel true mirth borne of more than an appreciation for having survived, and while winding down from the fight was leaving him feeling weakened and hollow, he knew he'd at last found what it was he'd for so long sought; A place, a people, who would have him as one of their own.

It was, as revelations go, well timed.

12. Unbreakable

****12; Unbreakable ****

****November 13, 2552 Sol Relative Time ****

****Southeast Africa, Earth****

Having stopped long enough to think about it, all the excitement and adrenalin worn away, Zimivee found himself ready, and quite willing, to collapse in his tracks. In consideration for his multitude of rather nasty injuries, however, he instead sat down, right where he was, to ease his introduction to the ground. There, he realized once he was down that even had a hundred Brutes crested the hill, he would not be getting back up.

Zimivee had found his end â€" his limit, the outermost point of stress and ability, where no more could be given of him. He was exhausted, hurt and hungry, but in no way fashion or form willing to eat or let himself lie down to rest â€" if he ate, he thought it might only be regurgitated, due to the roiling sensation his innards harbored, and if he let himself sleep with the multitude of wounds he had gained throughout his stay on Earth, he feared he would never again wake â€" and now that he'd finally found what he wanted and had something to look forward to other than the next lull, now would be a bad time to die.

He ran his dimming eyes over the fading forms of the two Humans and one Unggoy, for the moment feeling safe enough, but feeling as though he were fighting a losing battle against exhaustion. Even Gridolee had collapsed, and he'd had much better preparations for this sort of thing than Zimivee had. Stubbornly he clung to his consciousness, determined not to let himself fail at the precipice of long-suffered and long-sought success.

For his part, Shay noticed, but the way the Grunt's little mind worked was a mystery to all concerned, and he didn't make vocal note of his observance immediately to anyone. He just stood there, looking at the young Sangheili warrior, as if nonplussed at all that he very easily could be watching him die.

"Glad my pain makes you happy." Steve huffed, as a medic dropped into their makeshift hole. Doug chuckled at Shay's swift comment.

The Grunt gave him a look, and waddled past, to settle somewhere he thought appropriate to sit. "You pain no make me happy." He responded. "You no be crazy what make me happy." He glanced at Doug. "What we expect happen now?"

Doug adjusted as the Medic gave Steve a quick exam and then an injection to ease the pain. Doug sighed loudly, almost exhaustingly passing out from the sudden release of stress, but he held himself up right. "We can hope that nothing happens." Doug looked towards Zimivee. "But we know that won't be the case. The Brutes will come again, and this time we'll have to hold all on our own." Doug was unaware of Zimivee's earlier discussion with the Mirrator, so he added, "I know you have a lot to do, and I'm sure Tyrone will have a different opinion of letting you leave. If there is ever a time to go, now would be it."

Zimivee shook his head, almost smiling despite his own pain. "Aside the fact that now I am sitting down, I am most assuredly not going to be getting back up any time soonâ€¦ I am going to remain where I am. There is something to fight for, here, something that needs my aid and expertise, what there is of it, and I am prepared to lend that talent when and where I can." He seemed to swell slightly as though proud of something. "I made a promise to defend this base until such time as I am either slain or my kind come for me."

Shay wiggled in exasperated expression at the Elite. "Now you no be making no sense, either! What become of the times?? Where you all leaving you minds in morning? You no keep nothing sane under you helmets."

Steve winced as he gained some relief. "Sane? Our world is the focal point for saving the Universe from an alien mad man. I think we have the right to be a little insane."

Doug stood and walked toward Zimivee. "You'll stay?" He smiled. "That's great. We could use you. I mean, you are the only one of us with shields." Doug laughed. He extended his right hand. "Welcome aboard, forever how long we have you."

Zimivee's gaze fell from Doug's face to his hand, then flickered back up. At first, he misinterpreted the gesture, until he realized Doug didn't mean to help him up again. Extending his own hand, he took the Human's and sealed the sentiment inside the Human's long-standing gesture of pact-making. At that moment, Zimivee felt energized, more for the fact that he had, somehow, indeed discovered true acceptance, for nowhere else save on the battlefield were blood-brothers born, and no closer bond could ever form than between those who bled for one another, carrying each other when they could not walk on their own.

The goal would be achieved, because Zimivee was no longer alone.

Life was good.

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Fight until you can't. And when you can't fight anymore, you run, and when you can't run, you walk. And when you can't walk, you crawl, and when you can't crawl, you find someone to carry you.

So you get there no matter what.

--

Daylight streaked down through the clouds of char and ash, swirls of smoke turning softly in places where the heavier elements were thinner. Coal and soot littered everything, from plasma burns to bullet scarring. Next to nothing remained intact, old cars, roads, buildings constructed to withstand quakes. Nothing remained that didn't have holes in it, or soot on it, or someone unfortunate draped over it.

Zimivee had spent the prior week resting, able then to do so for the sheer fact that nothing remained at odds for the Human-Sangheili resistance to fight with. Or if there did, it wasn't here. He walked

quietly along the path he had chosen earlier that morning, almost admiring the wreckage of what had once been a bustling Human metropolis. Now it was a ghost town, the only thing living in it more to the tune of scavengers and carrion eaters.

Light spilling through the broiling smoke clouds overhead and the riddled walls and overpasses that he passed caught and glinted from his brilliant coppery armor, reflecting in a million other directions. The display was small, but he paid attention, taking small joy in the little things he could see rather than participating in the despair of the situation of his environment as a whole. Where the fingers of light touched the ground, there seemed a brighter future, a cheerier idea.

His hooves paused beside a scorched M1A4 Scorpion, spent casings littering the broken pavement all around the ruined machine, when he found a tiny item out of place. There between the cracks, in a split of pavement and gravel, was a small, delicate flower, reaching upwards boldly, asking only that the sun have time to kiss it just once.

Zimivee looked down at it, and smiled. Unbreakable. No matter how many times a city was shelled from orbit, there always remained some small defiance, some life, somewhere inside it, willing to defy the will of its tormentors by raising its head and blooming anyway. Zimivee could identify with that flower; so fragile, so hurt, but he'd come back from the brink time and again for nothing more than a reason to bloom. Upon the discovery by the Mirrator, and the acceptance into their ranks, he felt he could finally open his own petals too.

And perhaps, just perhaps, he could make someone, somewhere, for once, proud to have known one six foot four inch Hoku Zimivee.

End
file.